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The Game of Liberty

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By

E. Phillips Oppenheim



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THE GAME OF LIBERTY

CHAPTER I

THE MAN AT STEPHANI'S

THE thing happened so suddenly that I really had very little time to make up my mind what course to adopt under somewhat singular circumstances. I was seated at my favourite table against the wall on the right-hand side in Stephani's Restaurant, with a newspaper propped up before me, a glass of hock by my side, and a portion of the *plat du jour*, which happened to be chicken *en casserole*, on the plate in front of me. I was, in fact, half-way through dinner when, without a word of warning, a man who seemed to enter with a light-footed speed which, considering his size, was almost incredible, drew a chair towards him and took the vacant place at my table. My glass of wine and my plate were moved with smooth and marvellous haste to his vicinity. Under the cover of the tablecloth a

packet—I could not tell what it contained—was thrust into my hand.

"Sir," he said, raising my glass of wine to his lips, "I am forced to take somewhat of a liberty. You can render me the service of a lifetime. Kindly accept the situation."

I stared at him for a moment, quite blankly. Then I recognized him, and, transferring at once the packet to my trousers pocket, I drew another glass towards me and poured out the remainder of my half-bottle of hock. So much, at any rate, I felt that I had saved!

"I shall offer you presently," my self-invited guest continued, with his mouth full of my chicken, "the fullest explanation. I shall also ask you to do me the honour of dining with me. I think I am right in saying that we are not altogether strangers?"

"I know you very well by sight," I told him. "I have seen you here several times before with a young lady."

"Exactly," he agreed. "My daughter."

"Then for the sake of your daughter," I said, with an enthusiasm which was not in the least assumed, "I can assure you that, whether as host or guest, you are very welcome to sit at my table. As for this packet——"

"Keep it for a few moments, my young friend,"

the new-comer interrupted, "just while I recover my breath—that is all. By the by," he went on, sipping his wine, "you make a mistake in drinking your wine from half-bottles. Henry," lifting his finger as the wine waiter passed, "a bottle of Berncastler—you know the number. See that it is charged to me."

"The packet," I reminded him.

"Keep it for a little longer," he begged. "I dare not ask you to produce it yet. Have confidence in me. Things may happen here very shortly. Sit tight, and you will never regret it all your life. My name, so far as you are concerned, is Joseph H. Parker. Tell me—you are facing the door—someone has just entered. Who is it?"

"A stranger," I replied; "a stranger to this place, I am sure. He is tall and dark; he is a little lantern-jawed; a hatchet-shaped face, I should call it."

"My man, right enough," Mr. Joseph H. Parker muttered. "Don't seem to notice him particularly," he added, "but tell me—what is he doing?"

"He seems to have entered in a hurry," I announced, "for the attendant has followed him in. He is now taking off his overcoat. He is wearing, I perceive, a bowler hat, a dinner jacket,

the wrong-shaped collar, and he appears to have forgotten to change his boots."

"That's Cullen all right," Mr. Joseph H. Parker groaned. "You're a person of observation, sir. You've got him down slick. Well, I've been in tighter corners than this, thanks to you."

"Who is Mr. Cullen, and what does he want?" I asked.

"Mr. Cullen," my guest declared, sampling the fresh bottle of wine which had just been brought him, "is one of those misguided individuals whose lack of faith in his fellows will bring him, some time or other, to a bad end. My young friend, sip that wine thoughtfully—don't hurry over it—and tell me whether my choice is not better than yours."

"Possibly," I remarked with a glance at the yellow seal, "your pocket is longer. By the by, your friend is coming towards us."

"It is not a question of pocket," Mr. Parker continued, disregarding my remark. "It is a question of taste and judgment—discrimination is perhaps the word I should use. Now in my younger days I was fond of Germany. I spent some years there. I grew to understand German wines. I became accustomed——Eh? What's that?"

The person named Cullen had paused at my table. His hand was resting gently upon the shoulder of my self-invited guest. Mr. Parker looked up, and appeared to recognize him with much surprise.

"You, my dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "Say, I'm delighted to see you, I am sure! But would you mind—just a little lower with your fingers. Too professional a touch altogether!"

Mr. Cullen smiled, and from that moment I took a dislike to him—a dislike which did much towards determining the point of view from which I was inclined to consider various succeeding incidents. He was by no means a man of prepossessing appearance. His cheeks were colourless save for a sort of yellowish tinge. His mouth reminded me of the mouth of a horse, his teeth were irregular and poor. Yet there was about the man a certain sense of power. His eyes were clear and bright. His manner was imbued with the reserved strength of a man who knows his own mind and does not fear to speak it.

"I am sorry to interrupt you at your dinner, Mr. Parker," he said, his eyes travelling all over the table as though taking in its appointments and condition.

"Of no consequence at all," Mr. Parker assured him. "In fact, I am nearly finished. If you are

thinking of dining here, let me recommend this chicken *en casserole.* I have tasted nothing so good for days."

Mr. Cullen thanked him mechanically. His mind, however, was obviously filled with other things. He was puzzled and looked it.

"You must have a double about this evening, I fancy," he remarked. "I could have sworn that I saw you coming out of a certain little house in Adam Street not a couple of minutes ago. You know the little house I mean?"

Mr. Parker smiled.

"Seems as though that double were all right," he said. "I am half-way through my dinner, as you see, and I'm a slow eater, especially in pleasant company. Shake hands with my friend —Mr. Paul Walmsley, Mr. Cullen."

My surprise at hearing my own name correctly given was only equalled by the admiration which I also felt for my companion's complete and absolute assurance. Mr. Cullen and I exchanged a perfunctory handshake which left me without any change in my feelings towards him.

"Another of my mistakes, I suppose," Mr. Cullen said quietly. "I am afraid on this occasion, however, that I must trouble you, Mr. Parker. An affair of a few moments only. I won't even suggest Bow Street—at present. If

you could take a stroll with me—even into the manager's office would do."

Mr. Parker set down his knife and fork with a little gesture of irritation. His broad, good-natured face was for the moment clouded.

"Say, Cullen," he remonstrated, "don't you think you're carrying this a bit too far, you know? There isn't a man I enjoy a half-hour's chat with more than you, but in the middle of dinner—dinner with a friend too——"

"I try to do my duty," Mr. Cullen interrupted, "and I am afraid I am not at liberty to study your comfort."

Mr. Parker sighed heavily and fingered his wine-glass.

"One more glass of this delicious Berncastler, then," he remarked. "Do you mind, Walmsley, having my plate kept warm and reminding the man that I ordered asparagus to follow?" my new friend added, as he rose to his feet. "Mr. Cullen wants a word or two with me in private, and Mr. Cullen is a man who will have his own way."

I nodded as indifferently as possible, and the two men walked off together towards the entrance. Then I summoned my waiter.

"Bring me," I ordered, "a fresh portion of chicken and order some asparagus to follow.

Keep my friend's chicken warm, and order him some asparagus also."

The man departed, and I filled my glass with the very excellent wine which Mr. Parker had ordered. Leaning back in my chair, I tried to puzzle out the probable meaning of this somewhat extraordinary happening. My acquiescence in the attitude which had been so suddenly forced upon me was owing entirely to one circumstance. Mr. Joseph H. Parker I had recognized at his first entrance as a regular habitué of the restaurant. He was usually accompanied by a young lady who, from the first moment I had seen her, had produced an effect upon my not too susceptible disposition for which I was wholly unable to account, but which was the sole reason why I had given up my club and all other restaurants and had occupied that particular place for the last fortnight. I had put the two down as an American and his daughter travelling in England for pleasure, and my continual presence at the restaurant was wholly inspired by the hope that some opportunity might arise by means of which I could make their acquaintance. Adventures, in the ordinary sense of the word, had never appealed to me. I was privileged to possess many charming acquaintances among the other sex, but not one of them had ever

inspired me with anything save the most ordinary feelings of friendship and admiration. The opportunity which I had desired had now apparently come. I had made the acquaintance of Mr. Joseph H. Parker, made it in an unceremonious manner, but still under circumstances which would probably result in his being willing to acknowledge himself my debtor. I had a packet of something belonging to him in my pocket, which was presumably valuable. His friend Mr. Cullen I detested, and the reference to Bow Street puzzled me. However, I had no doubt that in a few minutes everything would be explained. In the meantime, I sipped my wine and permitted myself to indulge in certain very pleasurable anticipations.

In the course of about a quarter of an hour Mr. Joseph H. Parker reappeared. He came down the room humming a tune and apparently quite pleased with himself. I took the opportunity of studying his personal appearance a little more closely. He was not tall, but he was distinctly fat. He had a large double chin, but a certain freshness of complexion and massiveness about his forehead relieved his face from any suspicion of grossness. He had a large and humorous mouth, delightful eyes, and plentiful eyebrows. His iron-grey hair was brushed carefully back

from his forehead. He gave one the idea of strength, notwithstanding the disabilities of his figure. He smiled contentedly as he seated himself once more at my table.

"Really," he began, "I scarcely know how to excuse myself, Mr. Walmsley. However, thanks to you, we can now dine in comfort. Up till now I fear that I have taken your good offices very much for granted, but I assure you that it will give me the greatest pleasure to make your closer acquaintance and to impress upon you my extreme sense of obligation."

"You are very kind," I replied. "By the by, might I ask how you know my name?"

"My young friend," Mr. Parker said, eyeing with approval the fresh portion of chicken which had been brought him, "it is my business to know many things. I go about the world with my eyes and ears open. Things which escape other people interest me. Your name is Mr. Paul Walmsley. You are one of a class of men which practically doesn't exist in America. You have no particular occupation that I know of, save that you have a small estate in the country which no doubt takes up some of your time. You have rooms in London which you occupy occasionally. You probably write a little—I have noticed that you are fond of watching people."

"You really seem to know a great deal about me," I confessed, a little taken aback.

"I am not far from the mark, am I?"

"You are not," I admitted.

"As regards your lack of occupation," Mr. Parker went on, "I am not the man to blame you for it. There are very few things in life which a man can settle down to nowadays. To a person of imagination the ordinary routine of the professions and the ordinary curriculum of business life is a species of slavery. We live in over-civilized times. There seems to be very little room anywhere for a man to gratify his natural instincts for change and adventure."

I murmured my acquiescence with his sentiments, and my companion paused for a few minutes, his whole attention devoted to his dinner.

"Might one inquire," I asked after a brief pause, "as to your own profession? You are an American, are you not?"

"I am most certainly an American," Mr. Parker assented.

"In business?" I asked.

Mr. Parker looked round. Our table was comparatively isolated.

"I am an adventurer," he replied mysteriously.

I stared at him and repeated the word. He beamed pleasantly upon me.

"An adventurer. My daughter, whom you have seen here with me, is an adventuress. We live by our wits, and we do pretty well at it. Sometimes we live in luxury. Sometimes we are up against it good and hard. The Ritz one day, you know, and Bloomsbury the next, but lots of fun all the time."

I looked at him a little blankly. "To a certain extent I suppose you are joking?" I asked.

"To no extent at all," he assured me. "By the by, as regards that packet. Would you mind just slipping it under this newspaper?"

I withdrew it from my pocket and obeyed him at once. Mr. Parker's fingers seemed to play with it for a moment, and I noticed at that moment what a strong and capable hand he seemed to have, with fingers of unusual length and suppleness. A dark-faced *maître d'hôtel*, who presided over our portion of the room, came up smiling, with an inquiry as to our coffee. He exchanged a casual sentence or two with Mr. Parker, bowed and passed on. Mr. Parker, a moment later, with a little smile lifted the newspaper. The packet had disappeared. He noticed my look of surprise and seemed gratified.

"A mere trifle that," he declared. "I can assure you that I could have taken it out of your pocket, if I had desired, without your feeling a thing."

"Wonderful!" I murmured, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

"Just a gift," he continued modestly. "We all have our talents, you know. I have ordered some special coffee. You shall take your choice of liqueurs."

I was beginning to think rapidly now.

"By the by," I asked, "what is Mr. Cullen's profession?"

"He is a detective," Mr. Parker answered, without hesitation, "and, to my mind, a singularly bad one. For two months he has had what they call his eye on me. Between ourselves, I think that he will have his eye on me still in another two months' time. I am sure I hope so, for I frankly admit that half the savour of life would be gone if my friend Mr. Cullen were finally to give me up as a bad job and leave me alone."

I suppose that something of what I was feeling was reflected in my face. I had always considered myself a man of the world, and I was interested enough in my fellows to enjoy mixing with all classes. But there was the girl!

"You are thinking——" my companion began softly.

"Your friend," I interrupted, "has just re-entered the restaurant. He is coming towards this table."

Mr. Parker's expression never changed. Not a muscle twitched. His tone was even careless.

" Just as well, perhaps," he remarked, " that we worked that little conjuring trick."

The detective stood once more at our table. My instinctive dislike of him was now an accomplished thing. I hated his smile of subdued triumph, and all my fundamental ideas as to law and order were seriously affected by it. I was distinctly on the side of my new acquaintance.

" I am sorry to interrupt this little feast," Mr. Cullen said, " but I shall have to trouble you both to come with me for a short time."

Mr. Parker carefully clipped the end of his cigar, and leaned back in his chair while he lit it.

" My friend Cullen," he remonstrated, " I have no objection to offering myself up as a victim to your superabundant energy, and trotting about with you wherever you choose. But when it comes to dragging my friends into it, I just want to say right here that I think you are carrying things a little too far—just a little too far, sir."

" If either of you seriously objects to my request," Mr. Cullen replied doggedly, " I can put the matter on a different basis."

" Who is this friend of yours, and why should we go anywhere with him ? " I asked.

Mr. Parker shook his head mournfully.

" You may well ask," he sighed. " You may not think it, to look at his ingenuous and honest expression, but the fact nevertheless remains that Mr. Cullen is a misguided but zealous member of the Sherlock Holmes fraternity."

I rose to my feet with some alacrity.

" Anything in the shape of an adventure is——" I began.

" Not much adventure about this," Mr. Parker interrrupted gloomily, brushing the ash from his waistcoat and also rising. " We are probably going to be searched for spoons. However, if it must be——"

For the first time in my life I walked side by side with a detective. He led us to the far end of the restaurant, into an apartment usually used by the manager as a wine-tasting office, and carefully closed the door behind us. Outside, I caught the glimmer of a policeman's helmet.

" Every precaution taken, you perceive," Mr. Parker remarked. " In case we should turn out to be desperate characters, and, appalled by the fear of discovery, should be driven to make a personal attack upon Mr. Cullen, a myrmidon of the law is lurking near. Under those circumstances, I shall eschew violence ; I shall submit myself peaceably to a second examination."

I found the affair, on the whole, interesting. I

divested myself only of my coat and waistcoat, and Mr. Cullen's fingers did the rest. Only a single and momentary frown betrayed his disappointment as, ten minutes later, he unlocked the door.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I owe you my most profound apologies."

"That's all right, Cullen," Mr. Parker observed, patting him on the shoulder, "but let's have this thing straight now. Are we to be allowed to finish our dinner in peace, or shall you be turning up again with a new idea? And if I take a box for the Tivoli presently, shall we have the pleasure of seeing you bob in upon us?"

"So far as my present intentions are concerned," Mr. Cullen remarked grimly, "you may rely upon remaining undisturbed. "I am sorry, Mr. Walmsley," he added, turning to me, "to have been the cause of any annoyance to you this evening. My advice to you is, if you wish to escape these sort of inconveniences through life, to avoid the society of people whose character is known to the police."

"I shall get you for libel yet, Cullen," Mr. Parker declared, pulling down his waistcoat. "What I've done to annoy that man I can't imagine," he went on impersonally. "Mind, he practises on me—I'm convinced of it."

Mr. Cullen left us abruptly and quitted the restaurant. I returned to our table with my new friend.

"Really," he said, "I scarcely know how to apologize to you, Mr. Walmsley. Under these circumstances, it will have to be the Paillard brandy. This sort of thing amuses me, as a rule, but I must admit that Mr. Cullen is apt to get on one's nerves. A well-meaning man, mind, but unduly persistent."

I resumed my seat at the table. I was feeling a little dazed. Opposite, talking to two ladies, was the smooth-faced *maître d'hôtel*, into whose keeping I felt sure that packet had gone. Seated by my side was the gentleman who had assured me with the utmost self-possession that he was an adventurer. And, standing in the doorway, looking at us, was the girl who for the last few weeks had monopolized all my thoughts, who had played havoc to such a complete extent with the principles of my life, that for her sake I was at that moment willing to range myself even amongst the outcasts of the world.

CHAPTER II

THE COUP IN THE GAMBLING DEN

ON seeing us, the girl advanced into the room. I called Mr. Parker's attention to her, and he rose at once to his feet. It was a cold evening in April, and she was wearing a long coat trimmed with dark-coloured fur, and a hat also trimmed with fur, but with something blue in it. She was rather tall; she had masses of dark brown hair, a suspicion of a fringe, and deep blue eyes. She came towards us very deliberately, with the same grace of movement which I had watched and admired, night after night. She gave me a glance of the slightest possible curiosity as she approached. Then her father introduced us.

"This is Mr. Paul Walmsley, my dear," he said,—"my daughter. Have you dined, Eve?"

She shook hands with me and smiled very charmingly.

"Hours ago," she replied. "I didn't mean to come out this evening, but I was so bored that I thought I would try and find you."

She accepted the chair which I was holding and unbuttoned her coat.

"You will have some coffee?" I begged.

"Why, that would be delightful," she agreed. "I am so glad to find you with my father, Mr. Walmsley," she continued. "I know that he hates dining alone, but this evening I had an appointment with a dressmaker quite late, and I didn't feel a bit like dinner, anyhow."

"You come here often, don't you?" I ventured.

"Very often indeed," she replied. "You see, it is not in the least entertaining where we are staying, and the cooking is abominable. Then father adores restaurants. Do tell me what you have been talking about, you two men, all the evening?"

"The truth," Mr. Parker remarked, lighting another cigar. "My daughter knows that I speak nothing else. It is a weakness of mine. Mr. Walmsley and I were exchanging notes as to our relative professions. I told him frankly that I was an adventurer and you an adventuress. I think by now that he is beginning to believe it."

She laughed very softly, almost under her breath, yet I fancied that there was a note of mockery in her mirth.

"Confess that you were very much shocked, Mr. Walmsley," she said.

"Not in the least," I assured her.

She raised her eyebrows ever so slightly.

" Confess, then," she went on, taking a cigarette from a little gold case which hung from her side, " confess that in all your well-ordered life you have never heard such an admission made by two apparently respectable people before."

" How do you know," I asked, " that my life has been well ordered ? "

" Look at yourself in the glass," she begged.

Scarcely knowing what I did, I turned around in my seat and obeyed her. There is, perhaps, a certain preciseness about my appearance as well as my attire. I am tall enough, well over six feet, but my complexion still retains traces of years in Africa and of my fondness for outdoor sports. My hair is straight, and I have never grown beard or moustache. I felt, somehow, that I represented things which in an Englishman are a little derided by young ladies on the other side of the water.

" I can't help my appearance," I said, a little crossly. " I can assure you that I am not a prig."

" Our young friend," Mr. Parker intervened, " has certainly earned his immunity from any such title. To tell you the truth, Eve, he has already been my accomplice this evening in a certain little matter. But for his help, who knows that I might not have found myself up against it ? Between

us we have even had a little fun out of our very dear friend Cullen."

Her expression changed. She seemed, for some reason, none too well pleased.

"What have you been doing?" she asked me.

"I, personally, have been doing very little indeed," I told her. "Your father entered the restaurant in a hurry about an hour ago, and found it convenient to seat himself at my table and help himself to my dinner. He entrusted me, also, with a packet which I subsequently returned to him."

"It is now," Mr. Parker declared, replying to his daughter's anxious glance, "in perfectly safe hands."

She sighed and shook her head at him.

"Daddy," she murmured plaintively. "why will you run such risks? Even Mr. Cullen isn't an absolute idiot, you know, and there might have been someone else watching."

Mr. Parker nodded.

"You are quite right, my dear," he admitted. "To tell you the truth, Cullen was really a little smarter than usual this evening. However, there's always the luck, you know—our luck. If Mr. Walmsley had turned out a different sort of man—but then I knew he wouldn't."

She turned her head and looked at me. She

Mr. Parker went on. "No gambling hells in London, eh? Well, we shall see!"

To my great relief, Eve made no spoken objection to my inclusion in the party. When at last we left, a large and handsome car was drawn up outside, waiting for us.

"A taxicab," Mr. Parker explained, "is of no use to me—no more use than a hansom cab. I have to keep a car in order to slip about quietly. Now, in what part of London shall we look for a gambling hell, Mr. Walmsley? I know of eleven. Name your own street—somewhere in the West End."

I named one at random.

"The very place," Mr. Parker declared, "where I have already an appointment. Get in. Say, you Londoners have no idea what goes on in your own city!"

We drove to a quiet street not very far from the Ritz Hotel. Mr. Parker led us across the pavement, and we entered a block of flats. The entrance hall was dimly lit, and there seemed to be no one about. Mr. Parker, however, rang for a lift, which came promptly down.

"You two will stay here," he directed, "for two or three minutes. Then the lift will come down for you."

He ascended and left us there. I turned at once

to Eve, who had scarcely spoken a word during the drive from the restaurant.

" I do wish you would tell me what is troubling you, Miss Parker ? " I begged. " If I am really in the way, of course, you have only to say the word and I'll be off at once."

She held my arm for a moment. The touch of her fingers gave me unreasonable pleasure.

" Please don't think me rude or unkind," she pleaded. " Don't even think that I don't like your coming along with us, because I do. It isn't that. Only, as I told my father before supper, you don't belong—you ought not to be seen at these sort of places, and with us. For some absurd reason, Father seems to have taken a fancy to you. It isn't a very good thing for you. It very likely won't be a good thing for us."

" Do please change your opinion of me a little," I implored her. " I can't help my appearance, but let me assure you that I am willing to play the Bohemian to any extent so long as I can be with you. There isn't a thing in your life I wouldn't be content to share," I ventured to add.

She sighed, a little petulantly. She was half convinced, but against her will.

" You are very obstinate," she declared, " but, of course, you're rather nice."

After that, I was ready for anything that

might happen. The lift had descended and the porter bade us enter. We stopped at the third floor. In the open doorway of one of the flats Mr. Parker was standing, solid and imposing. He beckoned us, with a broad smile, to follow him. To my surprise, there were no locked doors or burly doorkeepers. We hung up our things in the hall and passed into a long room, in which were some fifteen or twenty people. Most of them were sitting around a *chemin de fer* table; a few were standing at the sideboard, eating sandwiches. A dark-haired, dark-eyed, sallow-faced man, a trifle corpulent, undeniably Semitic, who seemed to be in charge of the place, came up and shook hands with Mr. Parker.

"Glad to see you, sir, and your daughter," he said, glancing keenly at them both and then at me. "This gentleman is a friend of yours?"

"Certainly," Mr. Parker replied. "I won't introduce you, but I'll answer for him."

"You would like to play?"

"I will play, certainly," Mr. Parker answered cheerfully. "My friend will watch—for the present at any rate."

He waved us away, himself taking a seat at the table. I led Eve to a divan at the farther corner of the room. We sat there and watched the people. There were many whose faces I knew, a

sprinkling of stockbrokers, one or two actresses and half a dozen or so men about town of a dubious type. On the whole the company was scarcely reputable. I looked at Eve and sighed.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

"This is no sort of place for you, you know," I ventured.

"Here it comes," she laughed, "the real hide-bound, respectable Englishman! I tell you that I like it. I like the life, I like the light and shade of it all. I should hate your stiff English country houses, your highly moral amusements, your dull day-by-day life. Look at those people's faces as they bend over the table."

"Well, I am looking at them," I told her. "I see nothing but greed. I see no face that has not already lost a great part of its attractiveness."

"Perhaps," she replied indifferently. "I will grant you that greed is the keynote of this place, yet even that has its interesting side. Where else do you see it so developed? Where else could you see the same emotion actuating a number of very different people in an altogether different manner?"

"For an adventuress," I remarked, "you seem to notice things."

"No one in the world, except those who live

by adventures, ever has any inducement to notice things," she retorted. "That is why amateurs are such failures. One never does anything so well as when one does it for one's living."

"The question is arguable," I submitted.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Every question is arguable if it is worth while," she agreed carelessly. "Look at all these people coming in."

"I don't understand it," I confessed. "These places are against the law, yet there seems to be no concealment at all. Why aren't we raided?"

"Raids in this part of London only take place by arrangement," she assured me. "This place will reach its due date some time, but everyone will know all about it beforehand. They are making a clear profit here of about four hundred pounds a night, and it has been running for two months now. When the raid comes, Mr. Rubenstein—I think that is his name—can pay his five hundred pounds fine and move on somewhere else. It's wicked the money they make here some nights."

"You seem to know a good deal about it," I remarked.

"The place interests Father," she told me. "He comes here often."

"And you?"

" Sometimes. I am not always in the humour."

I looked at her long and thoughtfully. Her beauty was entirely the beauty of a young girl. There were no signs of late hours or anxiety in her face. She puzzled me more than ever.

" I wish I knew," I said, " exactly what you mean when you call yourself an adventuress."

She laughed.

" It means this," she explained : " To-night I have money in my purse, jewels on my fingers, a motor-car to ride home in. In a week's time, if things went badly with us, I might have nothing. Then Father or I, or both of us, would go out into the world to replenish, and from whomever had most of what we desired we should take according to the opportunity."

" Irrespective of the law ? "

" Absolutely."

" Irrespective of your sense of right and wrong ? "

" My sense of right and wrong, according to your standards, does not exist."

I gave it up. She seemed thoroughly in earnest and yet every word she spoke seemed contrary to my instinctive judgment of her. She pointed to the table.

" Look," she whispered. " These people don't seem as though they had all that money to gamble

with, do they? Look! There must be a thousand or fifteen hundred pounds upon the table."

It was just as she said these words that the thing happened. From somewhere amongst the little crowd of people gathered around the table, there came the sound of a heavy stamping upon the floor, and in less than a moment every light in the room went out. The place was in sombre darkness. Then, breaking the momentary silence, there came from outside a shrill whistle. Again there was a breathless silence, and then pandemonium. In a dozen different keys one heard the same shout:

"The police!"

Eve gripped my arm. My matchbox was out in a moment and I struck a vesta, holding it high over my head. As it burnt up a queer little halo of light seemed thrown over the table. The door was wide open and blocked with people rushing out. The banker was still sitting in his place. At first I seemed to have the idea that Mr. Parker was by his side. Then, to my astonishment, I saw him at the opposite end of the table, standing as though he had appeared from nowhere. A stentorian voice was heard from outside.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you please! Nothing has happened. The lights will be on again immediately."

Almost as he spoke the place was flooded with light. The faces of the people were ghastly. A babel of voices arose.

"Where are the police?"

"Where are they?"

"Who said the police?"

The little dark gentleman whose name was Rubenstein stood upon a chair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he called out, "nothing whatever has happened—nothing. The electric lights went out owing to an accident which I will investigate. It seems to have been a practical joke on the part of the lift man, who has disappeared. There are no police here. Please take your places. The game will proceed."

They came back a little reluctantly, as though still afraid. Then suddenly the banker's hoarse voice rang out through the room. All the time he had been sitting like an automaton. Now he was on his feet, swaying backwards and forwards, his eyes almost starting out of his head.

"Lock the doors! The bank has been robbed! The notes have gone! Mr. Rubenstein, don't let anyone go out! I tell you there was two thousand pounds upon the table. Someone has the notes!"

There was a little murmur of voices, a shriek

from one of the women as she clutched her handbag. Mr. Parker, bland and benign, rose to his feet.

"My own stake has disappeared," he declared. "and the pile of notes I distinctly saw in front of the banker has gone. I fear, Mr. Rubenstein, that there is a thief amongst us."

Mr. Rubenstein, white as a sheet, was standing at the door. He locked it and put the key in his pocket.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "play is over for to-night. We are, without a doubt, the victims of an attempted robbery. The lights were turned out from the controlling switch by the lift man, who has disappeared. I will ask you to leave the room one by one, and, for all our sakes, I beg that any here unknown to us will kindly submit themselves to be searched."

There was a little angry murmur. Mr. Rubenstein looked pleadingly around.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he begged, "you will not object, I am sure. I am a poor man. Two thousand pounds of my money has gone from that table—all the money I kept in reserve to make a bank for you. If anyone will return it now, nothing shall be said. But to lose it all—I tell you it would ruin me!"

The perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

He looked anxiously around, as though seeking for sympathy. Mr. Parker came over to his side.

"Say, Mr. Rubenstein," he declared, "there isn't here anyone who wants you to lose a five-pound note. That's a sure thing. But there is just one difficulty about this searching business. How can you identify your notes? If I, for instance, were to insist upon it that I had brought with me two thousand pounds in bank-notes in my pocket—which, let me hasten to assure you, I didn't—how should you be able to deny it?"

"My notes," Mr. Rubenstein replied feverishly, "all bear the stamp of Lloyds Bank and to-day's date. They can all be recognized."

"In that case," Mr. Parker continued, "I recommend you, Mr. Rubenstein, to insist upon searching every person here not thoroughly known to you; and I recommend you, ladies and gentlemen," he added, looking around, "to submit to be searched. It will not be a very strenuous affair, because no one can have had time to conceal the notes very effectively. I think you will all agree with me that we cannot allow our friend, who has provided us with amusement for so many nights, to run the risk of a loss like this. Begin with me, Mr. Rubenstein. No, I insist upon it. You know me better than most

of your clients, I think, but I submit myself voluntarily to be searched."

"I thank you very much indeed, sir," Mr. Rubenstein declared quickly. "It is very good of you to set the example," he continued, thrusting his hand into Mr. Parker's pockets. "Ah! I see nothing here—nothing! Notes in this pocket—ten, twenty, thirty. Not mine, I see—no Lloyds stamp. Gold? A pleasant little handful of gold, that. Mr. Parker, I thank you, sir. If you will be so good as to pass into the next room."

I brought Eve up. We were recognized as having been sitting upon the divan, and Mr. Rubenstein, with a bow and extended hand, motioned to us to pass on.

"You will visit us another evening, I trust," he said, "when we are not so disturbed."

"Most certainly," Mr. Parker promised in our names. "Most certainly, Mr. Rubenstein. We will all come again. Good-night, sir!"

We walked out on to the landing, and, descending the stairs, reached the street and stepped into the motor-car which was waiting for us. It rolled off and turned into Piccadilly.

"How much was it, Father?" Eve asked suddenly, from her place in the corner.

"I am not sure," Mr. Parker answered.

"There is a matter of eight hundred pounds in my right shoe, and a little more than that, I think, in my left. The note down my back was, I believe, a hundred-pound one. Quite a pleasant little evening, and fairly remunerative! The lift man will cost me another hundred, but he was worth it."

I sat quite still. I felt that Eve's eyes were watching me. I set my teeth for a moment. Then I turned towards her, my cigarette case in my hand.

"You don't mind?" I murmured, as I lit a cigarette.

She shook her head. Her eyes were still fixed upon me.

"Where can we drop you?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"If the evening is really over and there are no more excitements to come, you might put me down at the Milan Court," I told him, "if that is anywhere on your way. If not, I can easily walk."

Mr. Parker lifted the speaking tube to his lips and gave an order. We glided silently up to the Milan a few minutes later.

"I have enjoyed my evening immensely," I assured Eve impressively, "every moment of it; and I do hope, Mr. Parker," I added, as I shook hands, "that you and your daughter will give

me the great pleasure of dining with me any night this week. If there are any other little adventures round about here in which I could take a hand, I can assure you that I should be delighted. I might even be of some assistance."

They both of them looked at me steadfastly. Then Eve at last glanced away with a little shrug of the shoulders, and Mr. Joseph H. Parker gripped my hand.

" Say, you're all right," he pronounced. " You just ring up 3771A Gerrard to-morrow morning between ten and eleven."

CHAPTER III

CULLEN GIVES ADVICE

AT ten o'clock on the following morning my telephone bell rang and a visitor was announced. I did not catch the name which was given me, and it was only when I opened the door to him, in response to his ring, that I recognized Mr. Cullen. In morning clothes, which consisted in his case of a blue serge suit which needed brushing and a bowler hat of extinct shape, he seemed to me, if possible, a little more objectionable than I had found him last night. He presented himself, however, in a quiet and wholly non-aggressive spirit.

" Mr. Walmsley," he said, as he took the chair to which I motioned him and carefully nursed his hat, " I have called to see you very largely in your own interests."

I murmured something to the effect that I was extremely obliged.

" I have made inquiries concerning you," he went on, " and I find that you not only have a blameless record, but that you are possessed of

considerable means, and that you belong to a highly esteemed county family."

"And what of it, Mr. Cullen?" I asked.

"This," he answered, "that I feel it my duty to warn you against the companions with whom you spent a portion of last evening."

"You mean Mr. and Miss Parker?"

"I mean Mr. and Miss Parker."

"Are you making any definite charges against this young lady and this gentleman?" I inquired, after a moment's pause.

"Very definite charges indeed," he replied. "I warn you, Mr. Walmsley, that this man and his daughter are in bad repute with us, and to be seen associating with them is to bring yourself under police surveillance. We had a special warning when they sailed from New York, and since their arrival in London they have already been concerned in two or three very shady transactions."

"If they break the law," I inquired, "why do you not arrest them?"

"Because I have had bad luck—rotten bad luck," Mr. Cullen declared firmly. "I am perfectly convinced that this Mr. Parker, as he calls himself, has been financing one of the greatest artists in bank-note counterfeits ever known to the police. I am perfectly convinced that Mr.

Parker left this young man in Adam Street last night with a packet of notes upon his person for which he had just paid two hundred pounds, and if I could have arrested him then the game would have been up. He dodged me by going into the Cecil, leaving by the back way and coming through the Savoy; but I picked him up again within two minutes of his reaching Stephani's. Obviously with your collusion—you'll pardon me, sir, but there the facts are—he was seated at your table as though in the middle of dinner. I had him searched, but there wasn't a thing upon him. I am not going to ask you what he did with the notes he had—whether he palmed them off on you or not; but I will simply say that between the time of his entering Stephani's and the time of my searching him he got rid of a thousand pounds' worth of counterfeit notes."

"Sounds very clever of him," I remarked. "How do you know that he didn't get rid of them to someone in either the Cecil or the Savoy?"

"Because," Mr. Cullen explained, "he was followed by one of my men through both places and not lost sight of for a single second. You see, I made sure he would come to Stephani's, and I was on the other side of the street, but I had left a man in case he went the other way. I tell you that he was under strict surveillance the

whole of the time, excepting during the few minutes—in fact, I might almost say seconds —in the restaurant."

"Anything else against him?" I asked.

"I am not inclined," Mr. Cullen continued slowly, "to mention specifically the various cases which have come under my notice and in which I believe him to be concerned, but, amongst other things, he is a frequenter of half the gambling-houses in London and a tout for their owners. Trouble follows wherever he goes. But, Mr. Walmsley, mark my words. I am not a man given to idle speech, and I assure you that within a few weeks—perhaps within a few days—I shall have him—aye, and the young lady, too! You don't want to be mixed up in this sort of business, sir. I am here to give you the office to sheer off. They'll only rob you and bring you, too, under suspicion."

I lit a cigarette and stood upon the hearthrug with my hands behind me.

"Mr. Cullen," I said, "it is, of course, very kind of you to come to me in this disinterested manner. You don't seem to have anything to gain by it, so I will accept your attitude as being a bona fide one. I will, if I may, be equally frank with you. I met both Mr. Parker and his daughter last night for the first time——"

"Then that dinner was only a plant!" Mr. Cullen interrupted swiftly. "I knew it!"

I ignored the interruption.

"For the first time," I repeated, "and I find them both most delightful companions. As to how far our acquaintance may progress that is entirely a matter for chance to decide. You have doubtless come here with very good motives, but I see no reason why I should accept your statements concerning Mr. Parker and his daughter. You understand? My suggestion is that you are mistaken. Until I have proved them to be other than they represent themselves to be," I added, with infinite subtlety, "I shall continue to derive pleasure from their society."

Mr. Cullen rose at once to his feet.

"My warning has been given, sir," he said. "It only remains for me to wish you good-morning, and to assure you regretfully that your name will be added to those whom Scotland Yard thinks it well to watch."

"I trust that Scotland Yard will benefit," I replied politely, and showed him out.

At half-past ten I rang up 3771A Gerrard. The telephone was answered almost immediately by a man apparently a servant. I inquired for Mr. Parker, and in a moment or two I heard his voice at the telephone.

"This is Joseph H. Parker speaking. Who are you?"

"I am Paul Walmsley. You told me I might ring you up between ten and eleven."

"Sure!" was the prompt reply. "My dear fellow, I am delighted to hear from you. None the worse for our little adventure last night, I hope?"

"Not in the least," I assured him. "On the contrary, I am looking forward to another."

"You shall have one," was the delighted answer. "What about——what is it, Eve? . . . Excuse me for one moment, Mr. Walmsley."

Mr. Parker was apparently dragged away from the telephone. I waited impatiently. He returned in a moment or two. His voice sounded as though he were a little irritated.

"Sorry," he said. "I was going to make a little suggestion to you for this evening, but my daughter here doesn't fall in with it. They will have their own way, these girls."

"It's very disappointing," I protested. "Couldn't you prevail upon her?"

"Look here," Mr. Parker continued, "I tell you what. Let's meet accidentally at dinner to-night. I'll talk Eve round before then. You drop into Stephani's for dinner at about seven-thirty. Then, when you see us there, you can come over and join us."

"Thank you very much," I replied heartily. "By the by, I suppose you couldn't tell me your address? I should like to have sent Miss Parker some flowers."

Mr. Parker obviously hesitated.

"Better not," he decided regretfully; "not this morning, at any rate. Eve is a bit peculiar; and if you come into our little scheme and it goes wrong, the less you know of us the better. See you later."

I did see Mr. Parker later, but not quite so late as the time appointed. He was having a long drink in the American bar at the Milan when I looked in there just before luncheon, and he was talking to two of the most ferocious and objectionable-looking ruffians I had ever seen in my life. He glanced at me blandly but without any sign of recognition save that I fancied I caught the slightest twitch of his left eyebrow. I took the hint, ordered a mixed vermouth myself, and drank it alone. My reward came presently, for after leaving the room with his two acquaintances, Mr. Parker strolled back again, and, coming straight over to me, clapped me on the shoulder.

"This is capital!" he exclaimed. "We meet to-night?"

"Without a doubt," I assured him.

He drew me a little on one side.

" Say," he inquired, scratching the side of his chin, " have you any objection to a bit of a scrap ? "

" Not the slightest," I replied, " so long as Miss Parker is out of it."

" Good boy," Mr. Parker pronounced. " Yes, we'll keep her out of it ; all right. I shall count on you then. Just keep yourself in reserve. We'll talk it over at dinner-time. You just stroll in casually, and I'll call you over. By the by," he added, lowering his voice, " did you see those two fellows I was with ? "

" I saw them," I confessed. " They were just a trifle—noticeable."

Mr. Parker came a little nearer still to me. He accentuated his words by beating on the palm of his left hand with two fingers of his right.

" Absolutely, my dear Walmsley, two of the most unmitigated and desperate ruffians on either continent."

" They looked it," I agreed heartily.

" Their record," Mr. Parker continued, " their police record, I mean, is one of the most wonderful things ever put on to paper. The marvellous thing is how, even for a few minutes, they should be out of prison. Did you notice the one with the cast in his eye ? "

"I did," I admitted. "He was slightly the more hideous of the two."

"They used to call him Angel Jake," Mr. Parker proceeded confidentially. "He was sentenced to death once for shooting a policeman, but there was some informality—he was tried in the wrong court—so he got off."

"A very interesting acquaintance," I remarked, with utterly wasted sarcasm.

"They're fairly up to their neck in trouble—both of them—on the other side," Mr. Parker declared with relish; "and they're kind o' looking for it here."

I took him by the arm and led him out of the bar into a retired corner of the smoking-room.

"How is Miss Parker this morning?" I asked.

"Fine!" her father replied. "I told her about the flowers and it made her quite homesick. Girls miss that sort of thing, you know, and over here, living under a sort of cloud, as it were, one can't risk making many friends."

It was a very good opening for me, and I took advantage of it.

"Why do you choose to live under a cloud, Mr. Parker?" I asked.

"My dear fellow," he replied earnestly, "I don't altogether choose. I have been frank with you. It's my life."

"If it were only a question of money——" I began tentatively.

"A question of money," Mr. Parker interrupted. "Isn't everything a question of money? Say, what do you mean exactly?"

"I mean that I admire your daughter, sir—I admire her immensely," I told him. "If she'd have me, I'd marry her to-morrow. I am not what you would call on your side a wealthy man, but I have enough money for all reasonable purposes."

Mr. Parker was clearly staggered. He stroked his waistcoat for a moment in an absent sort of way. Then he called Tim the waiter, and ordered two light cocktails.

"This takes my breath away!" he exclaimed. "Let us understand exactly what it means."

"It means," I told him bluntly, "that I'll make a settlement upon your daughter and give you enough to live on."

He looked first at me and then at the carpet. He began to whistle softly.

"And they always told me," he murmured under his breath, "that you Britishers were so cautious. Why, you know nothing about us at all except what I've told you, and the Lord knows that isn't much of a recommendation! Besides—I may not have told you half."

"I am willing to take my risk," I declared. "I simply don't care. Once in a lifetime a man has that feeling for a woman. If he is wise, he goes nap on it. I have never had it before, and I am not going to let go. I feel that if I do I may regret it all my life. I don't want any other woman in this world except your daughter, and what I possess in life worth having I am willing to give to make sure of her."

Mr. Parker sat for several moments in profound silence. I could not make out what his mood was. He seemed neither unduly depressed nor elated. He was obviously puzzled, however; puzzled to know precisely what to do or what to say. He sat in the middle of the divan, with the thumb of one hand in his waistcoat pocket and the other hand on the table. His round face was innocent of smile or frown. Yet I knew that he was taking what I said seriously, although for some reason or other it did not seem to give him unqualified pleasure.

"Well, well," he said at last, "you've spoken up like a man, anyway, and like a man who knows what he wants. I can't tell how to answer you. I have never lived on anyone yet. Sponging's never been in my line. I have enjoyed living on my wits. And Eve—she's a little that way too. Makes me kind of sorry I've let her go

about with me so much. It's a wonderful cloak of respectability you'd throw over us, but I'm wondering whether it's large enough."

"As my wife——" I began.

"Oh, yes, you'd gather her in all right to start with," he interrupted, "but there are other things," he added, turning a little towards me and looking me in the face. "Supposing she didn't turn out just as you thought? She's a wild, high-spirited sort of creature is Eve. She loves the music and the rattle of life. I can't fancy her in one of those out-of-the-way, God-forsaken little mud-holes you call an English village, sitting in an early Victorian drawing-room all the afternoon, waiting for the vicar's wife to come to tea, and taking a walk before dinner for entertainment, with an umbrella and mackintosh."

"You've been reading Jane Austen," I told him.

"Never heard of her," he replied promptly. "I once—but never mind. Just keep this to yourself for a bit, my boy. If we come to any arrangement, there are one or two things we've got on which we might have to drop. We'll think this over. So-long till this evening."

He bustled away then, evidently anxious to escape any further conversation. I went about

my business, which consisted of a visit to my lawyer's in the afternoon, and a couple of rubbers at bridge at my club before dinner. At half-past seven precisely I strolled into Stephani's. I had scarcely taken my table before Mr. Parker and Eve entered. Contrary to his usual custom, Mr. Parker was wearing a dress coat, white waistcoat, and white tie, and Eve looked exquisite in a low-necked gown of white silk. Mr. Parker, according to his promise, beckoned me over.

"My dear boy," he said, "I insist upon it that you sit down and dine with us. Last night I dined with you. To be literal, I ate off your plate. To-night I return the compliment."

I had no idea of refusing, but I was watching Eve with some little anxiety. Her attitude seemed a little negative. However, she welcomed me pleasantly.

"Well," she asked, "is your conscience beginning to prick yet?"

"My conscience," I replied, "is about as imaginary a thing as my early-Victorian drawing-room. I assure you I have the most profound admiration for your father. I think he is one of the cleverest men I ever met."

She seemed a little taken aback. My tone, I felt quite sure, was convincing.

"Of course," she remarked, "it is possible that

I have formed a wrong idea of Englishmen. I have only met one or two."

"I should say it is highly probable," I agreed. "What scheme of villainy is before us to-night? I claim a share in it."

She shook her head.

"Not to-night, I'm afraid."

Mr. Parker, with the menu in front of him, was busy with the waiter and a *maître d'hôtel*. I dropped my voice a little.

"Why not? Are you going to the theatre?"

"To the opera."

"You love music?" I asked.

She leaned a little towards me. Her hair almost brushed my cheek as she whispered:

"We love jewellery!"

I flatter myself that not a muscle of my face moved.

"No place like the Opera," I remarked. "You should do well there, with a little luck."

This time I certainly scored. She looked at me fixedly for a moment. Then she laughed softly.

"I want a pearl necklace," she said.

"What about the one you have on?"

She held it out towards me.

"Imitations, unfortunately," she sighed. "They may look very nice, but they don't feel like the real thing."

"Why can't I come to the Opera with you?" I suggested.

"Because there are no vacant seats anywhere near ours," she replied. "You see, we happen to know whom we are going to sit near."

"Anyhow, I think I shall go," I decided. "I may be able to come and talk to you between the acts, at any rate."

Mr. Parker, having finished giving his orders, joined in the conversation, and we dined quite cheerily. For educated Americans, they seemed very ignorant of English life, and I was not surprised to hear that it was their first visit to Europe. They listened with interest to a great deal that I told them. It was only as we were about to leave that I asked Mr. Parker a definite question.

"Tell me," I whispered, "have you really any plan for to-night?"

He nodded.

"Sure! We're in luck just now. There's nothing like backing it."

"Are those fellows I saw you with this morning at the Milan in it? If so, I am going to take Miss Parker away. There are limits——"

He patted me on the back.

"That little affair is off for to-night, at any rate. A lady whom we are very anxious to meet

is going to the Opera. The little girl wants a pearl necklace. Well, we shall see."

"You've thought over what I said? Have you mentioned it to her?"

"Only kind of hinted at it. It's no good putting it too straight to her. She's got the bit between her teeth, and she'll need to be humoured."

Eve had gone to fetch her cloak, and we were alone outside the door. I looked at him steadfastly. He was so very pink and white, so very cheerful, so utterly optimistic.

"You've never seen the inside of an English prison, have you, Mr. Parker?" I asked.

He stared at me blankly.

"I am not thinking of you or myself," I went on. "She's so dainty and sweet. She looks like a child who has never known an hour of rough usage in her life. They wouldn't leave her much of that, you know."

I had certainly succeeded in making an impression this time. Mr. Parker's smooth forehead was wrinkled, his face was clouded.

"You are right, Mr. Walmsley," he admitted. "I wish—I wish she would listen to reason. We'll have a talk together, the three of us, soon. You've no idea how difficult it is. She doesn't know fear—can't realize danger. Hush! Here she comes.

It will only set her against you if she thinks you are trying to influence me behind her back."

Mr. Parker's car was waiting, and we drove together to Covent Garden. I left them in the vestibule and went to call on some of my friends. My sister had a box in the second tier, and I was fortunate enough to find her there and alone with her husband. Almost directly underneath us in the stalls Mr. Parker and Eve were sitting, and next Mr. Parker a woman, wearing a pearl necklace. I asked my sister her name. She raised her lorgnette and looked over the side of the box.

" Lady Orstline," she told me. " Her husband is a South African millionaire."

" Are those real pearls she is wearing ? "

" My dear Paul," she laughed, " why not ? Her husband is enormously wealthy, and they say that her jewels are wonderful. Unlike so many of those sort of people, she really does select very fine stones, independent of size. These pearls she is wearing now, for instance, are quite small, but the lustre is exquisite. What an extraordinary fat man sitting next her—and what a pretty girl ! "

" Americans," I remarked.

" They look it," she agreed. " Quite the Gibson type of girl, isn't she ? "

The curtain went up, and we turned our attention to the stage. As a rule I find music soothing, but that night proved an exception. Perhaps because my moderately well-ordered life had crumbled into pieces, because I was conscious of a new and overmastering passion, the music appealed to me in an altogether different way. My enjoyment was no longer impersonal, a matter of the brain and the judgment. I felt the excitement of it throbbing in my pulses. The gloomy, half-lit auditorium seemed full of strange suggestions. I felt in real and actual touch with the great things which throbbed beneath. I was no longer an auditor, a looker-on. I had become a participator.

The hours passed as though in a dream. I talked to my sister and her husband, and I exchanged the usual gossip with their callers. I even paid a call or two on my own account, but I have no recollection of whom I went to see or what we talked about. I had no chance to visit either Mr. Parker or Eve, for neither of them left their places, and they were in the middle of a row, but I took good care that we were close together in the vestibule towards the end. With a little shiver I saw Lady Orstline was there, too, next to Mr. Parker. I was a few feet behind them both, with my sister. I found

myself watching almost feverishly. As usual, there was a block outside, and the few yards between us and the door seemed interminable. I had none of the optimism of those others. I was filled with vague fears of some impending disaster. Suddenly, with a shiver, I recognized Cullen, scarcely a couple of yards away, also watching, wedged in amongst the throng. His lips were drawn closely together, his opera hat was well over his forehead, his eyes never left Mr. Parker. He looked to me there like a lean-faced rat preparing for its spring. I followed the exact direction of his steadfast gaze, and I became cold with apprehension. Lady Orstline was just in front of me. By her side was Eve, and immediately behind her—Mr. Parker. I tried to lean over, but it was impossible.

"Someone you want to speak to, Paul?" my sister asked.

"There's a man there, if I can only get at him."

The little crowd in front of us was suddenly thrown into disorder by having to let through two people whose carriage had been called. We seemed to lose ground in the confusion, for a moment or two later I noticed Lady Orstline standing outside the door, and my heart sank as I realized that her neck was bare.

Almost the same instant I saw her hand fly up and I heard her voice.

"My necklace!" she called out. "Policeman, dón't let anyone pass out! My necklace has been stolen—my pearls."

The confusion that followed was indescribable. The doors were almost barricaded. My sister and her husband and I were allowed through easily enough, as we were known to be subscribers, but almost everyone else seemed to be undergoing a sort of cross-examination. My brother-in-law was disposed to be irritable.

"Why can't the silly woman look after her jewels!" he exclaimed. "Another advertisement, I suppose."

"Can we drop you anywhere, Paul," my sister inquired, "or would you like to give us some supper?"

I had been staring out of the window. There was no sign anywhere of Eve or her father, nor had I been able to catch a glimpse of Mr. Cullen.

"I am sorry," I replied, "but I am supping with some friends at Stephani's. Could you set me down there?"

My sister raised her eyebrows as she gave the order. We were already in the Strand.

"Really, Paul," she remonstrated, "at your time of life—you are thirty-four years old, mind

—I think you might leave Stephani's to the other generation."

"Second childhood," I explained, as I descended. "In any case, I really have an appointment here. Give you supper any other night with pleasure! Many thanks."

My first intention had been not to enter the place at all, but to return at once to Covent Garden. Some impulse, however, prompted me to glance round the room first. To my amazement, Eve and her father were already seated at their usual table, Eve drawing off her gloves and her father with the wine list in his hand. I made my way towards them. I suppose my expression indicated a certain stupefaction, for directly I got there Eve began to laugh softly up into my face.

"We aren't ghosts," she declared. "Did you think that you were the only person who could leave the Opera in a hurry?"

"I saw you in the vestibule," I ventured. "I never saw you get away."

"No more did our friend Cullen," Mr. Parker remarked, smiling. "I really am beginning to feel sorry for that man. We were within a yard or two of him, and he was watching us good and hard. I think he had an idea that Eve had a weakness for pearls."

"Oh, don't!" I exclaimed, rather sharply. "Even in joke it isn't exactly wise, is it, with people passing all the time?"

"Joke!" Mr. Parker repeated. "Precious little joke about it, I can assure you. I dare say it looked simple enough to you, but it was really quite a complicated business. Never mind, Eve has her pearls, and that's the great thing."

Then he thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and, without the least attempt at concealment, he produced and plumped upon the table in front of him the pearl necklace which only a few minutes ago I had seen upon the neck of Lady Orstline.

"Look much better on Eve when they've been restrung, won't they?" he observed. "Gee whiz, what lovely stones they are?"

"Put it away," I gasped. "For heaven's sake put it away!"

"Why should I?" he asked coolly.

My heart suddenly seemed to stop beating. I felt as though the end of the world had come. With the light of triumph ablaze in his narrow eyes, Mr. Cullen was standing by our table.

"Good evening, Mr. Parker!" he said, in a tone from which he tried to keep the note of triumph. "Good evening, young lady!"

The hand of Mr. Parker had suddenly covered

the pearl necklace. Mr. Cullen was looking steadily towards it.

"I trust," he continued, "that my arrival was not inopportune. I haven't interrupted anything, have I—any little celebration, or anything of that sort?"

"On the contrary, we are always pleased to see you," Mr. Parker declared warmly. "Sit right down, Mr. Cullen. You'll join us, I trust? We were just thinking of ordering a little supper."

Mr. Cullen shook his head.

"Perhaps," he advised, "it would be better to postpone that order."

"Postpone it?" Mr. Parker repeated, glancing at the clock. "Why it's late enough now. Good heavens, is that the time!"

Mr. Cullen and I both glanced at the clock at the other end of the room. It was twenty minutes to twelve. The detective looked back with a smile.

"You are a past master, Mr. Parker," he said, "in the accomplishment which, I believe, in your country goes by the name of bluff, but there are limits, you know. I shall have to ask you and your daughter and Mr. Walmsley here to accompany me at once to Bow Street. And," he added, suddenly leaning across the table, "move your right hand, please! Don't make a disturbance,

for Branco's sake. If you want trouble, you can have it."

Mr. Parker raised his hand at once.

"Trouble?" he echoed. "That's the last thing I'm looking for."

Mr. Cullen smiled grimly.

"Ah! I thank you," he said. "A pearl necklace, I see! You must allow me to take charge of this, please."

Mr. Parker's look of surprise was admirably done.

"That is my daughter's necklace," he explained. "The fastening has become loose."

"Exactly!" Mr. Cullen sneered. "I am now going to ask you all three to come with me, without any further delay, to Bow Street."

"This man is mad!" Mr. Parker sighed, leaning back in his place. "Stark, staring mad! His interference with my meals is becoming unwarrantable."

"If you take my advice, you will avoid a scene," the detective said, leaning a little over the table. "Believe me, I am not to be trifled with. If you do not come willingly, there are other means. I am simply trying to avoid a disturbance in a public restaurant."

Mr. Parker rose reluctantly to his feet.

"Eve, dear," he said, "I suppose we may as well obey this very autocratic person. The

sooner we go, the sooner we shall be back to supper. Mr. Walmsley, I owe you my most profound apologies. I had no idea, when I asked you to join us, that you would become involved in anything disagreeable."

"Don't mind me," I begged him. "I am glad to come. Perhaps we had better get it over as soon as possible."

"We shall be back," Mr. Parker explained to Branco, who had strolled up to see what was happening, "in twenty minutes. Prepare, if you please, three oyster cocktails, some grilled cutlets, and *sauté* potatoes. Thank you, Branco. In twenty minutes, mind."

We passed out towards the entrance. Mr. Cullen was walking with almost professional proximity to his companion. Eve and I were a few steps in the rear.

"Eve," I whispered, drawing her for a moment close to me, "remember that whatever comes of this, whatever happens, there is no word I have ever said to you or to your father about you which I do not mean and shall not always mean."

She looked at me a little curiously. From the first her own demeanour had been singularly unmoved. During the last few seconds, however, she had grown paler. She suddenly took my hand and gave it a little squeeze.

" You really are—a little more than nice," she said.

We drove to the police station, and Mr. Cullen ushered us at once into a private room, where an inspector was seated at a table.

" Mr. Hennessey, sir," he began, " I have a charge against this man and his daughter, of theft. I watched them at the Opera House to-night. At the entrance they were both of them hustling Lady Orstline. As you will have heard, she cried out suddenly that her pearl necklace had been stolen. I rushed for these two, but by some means or other they had got away. I followed them to Stephani's Restaurant, and discovered them with the necklace on the table in front of them. The man Parker was showing it to the other two. He attempted to conceal it, but I was just in time."

The inspector nodded.

" Very good, Mr. Cullen," he said. " Where is the necklace ? "

The detective produced it proudly and laid it upon the table. The inspector dipped his pen in the ink.

" What is your name ? " he asked Mr. Parker.

" Joseph H. Parker," was the reply. " I am an American citizen, and this is my daughter. Mr. Cullen appears to be a person of observation.

It is true that we were at the Opera. It is perfectly true that we were within a few yards of Lady Orstline when she called out that her necklace was stolen. There's nothing remarkable about that, however, as we occupied adjacent stalls. What I want to point out to you is, though, if you'll allow me, that the necklace which I had on the table before me at Stephani's when Mr. Cullen suddenly popped round the screen, the necklace which you are now looking at, sir, is of imitation pearls, valued at about ten pounds. I bought it in the Burlington Arcade; it belongs to my daughter, and I was simply examining the clasp, which is scarcely safe."

There was a moment's breathless silence. To me, Mr. Parker's statement seemed too good to be true, yet he had spoken with the easy confidence of a man who knows what he is about. Standing there, the personification of respectability, a trifle indignant, a trifle contemptuous, his words could not fail to carry with them a certain amount of conviction. The inspector rang a bell by his side.

"What are your daughter's initials?" he asked quickly.

"E.P.—Eve Parker," Mr. Parker replied. "Look at the back of the gold clasp. There you are," he pointed out—"'E.P.'"

Mr. Cullen and the inspector both bent over

the necklace. The inspector gave a brief order to the policeman who entered.

"The initials on the clasp are certainly 'E.P.'" the inspector admitted slowly. "I do not pretend to be a judge of jewellery myself. However, I have sent for someone who is."

A man in plain clothes entered the room. The inspector beckoned to him, showed him the pearls, and whispered a question. The man examined them for barely five seconds. Then he handed them back.

"Very nice imitation, sir," he pronounced. "There's a place in Bond Street where I should imagine these came from, and another in the Burlington Arcade. Their value is from seven to ten pounds."

The inspector dismissed him. He handed the necklace back to Mr. Parker and rose to his feet.

"I can only express my most profound regret, sir," he said, "on behalf of the Force. Such a mistake is inexcusable. Mr. Cullen will, I am sure, join in offering you every apology in his power."

Mr. Cullen was standing a few yards back. He was biting his lip till it was absolutely colourless. There was a look in his face which was quite indescribable.

"If I have made a mistake this time," he

muttered, " if I have been a little premature, I apologize. But—but——"

Mr. Parker turned to the inspector.

" You know," he said, " I fancy this young man's got what they call on this side a ' down ' on me. He's got an idea that I'm a crook. Follows me about, don't give me a moment's peace, in fact. Say, Mr. Inspector, can't I put this thing right somehow—take him to my bankers——"

" Bankers ! " Mr. Cullen ejaculated softly. " The only use you have for a banker is to fleece him ! "

" Mr. Cullen ! " the inspector exclaimed.

" I beg your pardon, sir. I am sorry if I forgot myself."

He turned abruptly towards the door.

" I offer you my apologies, Mr. Parker," he said, looking back ; " also the young lady. But —some day the luck may be on my side."

The door slammed behind him. Mr. Parker turned towards the inspector.

" That young man, Mr. Inspector," he said complainingly, " puts altogether too much feeling into his work. I may have been a bit sarcastic with him once or twice, but if it comes to a life-long vendetta, or anything of that sort, why, he's beginning to look for trouble, that's all.

I'm getting sick of the sight of him. If ever I lunch or dine out, he's there. If I go to a theatre, he's around. Whatever harmless amusement I go in for, he's there looking on. Just give him a word of caution, Mr. Inspector. I'm a good-tempered man, but it can't go on for ever. Do I take it that we are at liberty, sir ? "

The inspector himself escorted us to the door.

" I beg, Mr. Parker," he said, " that you will take no more notice of Mr. Cullen's little fit of temper. As regards your complaint, I promise you that I will talk to him seriously. Allow me to send for a taxicab for you. Oh ! I beg your pardon—that is your own car. I only regret that we should have wasted a few minutes of your evening. Good night, gentlemen ! Good night, madam ! "

We left Bow Street amongst many manifestations of courtesy and good will.

" Where shall I tell him to go, sir ? " the policeman asked, as he closed the door.

" Back to Stephani's," Mr. Parker ordered.

We glided down into the Strand. Mr. Parker glanced at his watch.

" We shall just about make those grilled cutlets," he remarked. " Gives you kind of an appetite, this sort of thing. Say, what's the matter with you, Mr. Walmsley ? You seem glum."

I drew an immense sigh of relief.

"Oh, nothing particular!" I answered. "Only I was just wondering what in the name of all that's miraculous can have become of Lady Orstline's necklace."

We descended at Stephani's and were ushered to our table, where the oyster cocktails were waiting. Mr. Parker took my arm.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "you may even know that before you go to sleep to-night."

I thought of Mr. Parker's words an hour or so later, when I was preparing to undress. I emptied first the things from my trousers pockets. The feeling of something unfamiliar in one of them brought a puzzled exclamation to my lips. I dragged it out and held it in front of me. My heart gave a great leap, the perspiration broke out upon my forehead. My knees shook, and I sat down upon the bed. Without the slightest doubt in the world, it was Lady Orstline's pearl necklace!

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CHAPTER IV

THE WOOING OF EVE

I SPENT a very restless and disturbed night. I rose at six o'clock on the following morning, and at ten o'clock I rang up 3771A Gerrard. My inquiry was answered almost at once by Mr. Parker himself.

"Is that you, Walmsley?"

"It is," I replied. "I have been waiting to ring you up since daylight. I want you to understand——"

"You come right round here," Mr. Parker interrupted soothingly. "No good getting fussy over the telephone."

"Where to?" I asked. "You forget I don't know your address. I should have been round hours ago if I had known where to find you."

"Bless my soul, more you do! We are at No. 17 Banton Street—just off Oxford Street, you know."

"I am coming straight away," I replied.

I was there within ten minutes. The place seemed to be a sort of private hotel, unostentatious and unprepossessing. A hall-porter, whose uniform had seen better days and whose linen

cleaner ones, conducted me to the first floor. Mr. Parker met me on the landing.

"Come right in," he invited. "I saw you drive up. Eve is in there."

He ushered me into a large sitting-room of the type one would expect to find in such a place, but which by dint of many cushions, flowers, and knick-knacks had been made to look presentable. Eve was seated in an easy chair by the fire. She turned round at my entrance and laughed in my face.

"Where's my necklace, please?" she demanded.

"The necklace," I replied, as severely as I could, "is by this time on its way to Lady Orstline, if it is not actually in her hands."

"You mean to say that you have sent it back?" Mr. Parker exclaimed, incredulously.

"Certainly," I replied. "I posted it to her early this morning."

Mr. Parker's expression was one of blank bewilderment.

"Say, do I understand you rightly?" he continued, coming up and laying his great hand upon my shoulder. "You mean to say that after all we went through because of that miserable necklace, you've gone and chucked it? Do you know that it was worth twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"I don't care whether it was worth twenty-five thousand pounds or twenty-five thousand pennies," I retorted. "It belonged to Lady Orstline—not to you or your daughter or to me. I know that you are a skilful conjurer, and I won't ask you how it found its way into my pocket. I am only glad that I have had the opportunity of returning it to its owner."

Mr. Parker shook his head ponderously. He turned to Eve.

"This," he said solemnly, "is the young man who asked leave to join us! What do you think of him, Eve?"

"Nothing at all," she replied flippantly. "He is absolutely useless."

"If you think," Mr. Parker went on, "that we are in this business for our health, I want you to understand right here that you are mistaken. I never deceived you. I told you, the first few seconds we met, that I was an adventurer. I am. I brought off a coup last night with that necklace, and you've gone and queered it. It isn't for myself I mind so much," he concluded, "but there's the child there. I was going to have the pearls restrung and let her wear them until the time came for selling them."

"Look here," I said; "let us understand one another. It's all very well to live by your wits,

to make a little out of people not quite so smart as you are, to worry through life owing a little here and there, borrowing a bit where you can and taking good care to be on the right side when there's a bargain going. That, I take it, is more or less what is meant by being an adventurer. But when it comes to downright thieving, I protest. The penalties are too severe. I beg you, Mr. Parker, to have nothing more to do with it," I went on, speaking as earnestly as I could, and laying my hand upon his shoulder. "I ask you now what I asked you yesterday. Give me your daughter, or if I can't win her all at once, let me, at any rate, have the opportunity of meeting her and trying to persuade her to be my wife. I promise you you shan't have to do any of these things for a living, either of you. Be sensible, Miss Parker—Eve," I begged, turning to her. "And please be a little kind. I am in earnest about this. Come on my side and help me persuade your father. I am not wealthy, perhaps, as you people count money, but I am not a poor man. I'll buy you some pearls."

Eve threw down the book which she had been reading, and leaned over the side of her chair, looking at me. She seemed no longer angry. There was, indeed, a touch of that softness in her face which I had noticed once before, and which

had encouraged me to hope. Her forehead was a little puckered, her dear eyes a little wistful. She looked at me very earnestly, but when I would have moved towards her she held out her hand to keep me back.

"You know," she said, "I think you are quite nice, Mr. Walmsley. I rather like this outspoken sort of love-making. It's quite out of date, of course, but it reminds me of Mrs. Henry Wood and crinolines and wool work, and all that sort of thing. Anyhow, I like it, and—I rather like you, too. But, you see, it's how long—a matter of thirty-six hours?—since I met you first. Now I couldn't make up my mind to settle down for life with a man I'd only known thirty-six hours, even if he is rash enough to offer to pension my father and remove me from a life of crime."

"The circumstances," I persisted, "are exceptional. You may laugh at it as much as you like, but there are very excellent reasons why you should be taken away from this sort of life."

She shrugged her shoulders dubiously.

"There again," she protested, "I am not so sure that I want to be taken away from it. I like adventures. I adore excitement—in fact, I must have it."

"You shall," I protested. "I'll take you to Paris and Monte Carlo. We'll go up to Khartoum

and take a caravan beyond. You shall go big game shooting with me in Africa. I will take you where very few women have been before. I'll take you where you can gamble with life and death instead of this sordid business of freedom or prison. We'll start for Abyssinia in three weeks if you like. I'll find you excitement—the right sort. I'll take you into the big places where one feels and the empty places where one suffers."

Her eyes flashed for a moment sympathetically.

"It sounds good," she admitted, "and yet—am I ungrateful, I wonder?—there's no excitement for me except where men and women are. I am afraid I am a daughter of Babylon."

"Doomed from her infancy to a life of crime, I fear," Mr. Parker declared, pinching a cigar which he had just taken out of a box. "She loves the rapier play, the struggles with men and women. Takes risks every moment of the time and thrives on it. All the same, Mr. Walmsley, there's something very attractive about the way you are talking. I am not going to let my little girl decide too hastily. Our sort of life's all very well when we are number one and Mr. Cullen's number two. We can't have the luck all the time, though."

"I haven't dared to mention it in plain words,"

I answered, "because the thought, the mere thought of what might happen to Miss Eve is too horrible. But the risk is there all the time. One doesn't deal in forged notes or steal pearl necklaces for nothing, and you've an enemy in Cullen if ever anyone had. He means having you both, and if you give him the least chance he'll have no mercy."

I looked at them anxiously. The whole thing seemed to me so momentous. Neither of them showed the slightest signs of fear or apprehension. Mr. Parker, with his newly lit cigar in the corner of his mouth, was smiling a smile of pleasant contentment. Eve, leaning back in her chair with her hands clasped around the back of her head, was gazing at me with a bewitching little smile upon her lips.

"I am not a bit afraid of Mr. Cullen," she declared softly.

"Between you and me," her father remarked, knocking the ash from his cigar, "there's only one darned thing in this world we are afraid of, Eve and I, and that, thank Heaven, isn't this side the Atlantic!"

The smile faded from Eve's lips. For a moment she closed her eyes, a shiver passed through her frame.

"Don't!" she begged weakly.

"I guess I'll leave it at that," her father agreed. "Now this little proposition of yours, Mr. Walmsley, has just got to lie by for a little time —perhaps only for a short time. It's kind of a business for us to make up our minds to part with our liberty, or any portion of it. Meanwhile if you'd like to take Eve for a motor ride round and meet me for luncheon, why, the car's outside, and, if Eve's agreeable, I can pass the time all right."

I looked at her eagerly. She rose at once to her feet.

"Why, it would be charming, if you have nothing to do, Mr. Walmsley," she assented. "I'll put my hat on at once." She turned to the door.

"I have nothing to do at any time now but to respect your wishes," I answered firmly, "and wait until you are sensible enough to say 'Yes' to my little proposition."

She looked back at me from the door with a twinkle in her eyes.

"You know," she said, "before I came over I was told that Englishmen were rather slow. I shall begin to doubt it. You wouldn't describe yourself exactly as shy, would you, Mr. Walmsley?"

"I don't know about that," I replied, "but we have one or two other traits as well. We know what we want; very often we get it."

Mr. Parker rose to his feet. He put his hand

upon my shoulder. He was the very prototype of the self-respecting, conscientious, prospective father-in-law.

"Young fellow," he confessed, "I shall end by liking you."

I drove with Eve for about two hours. We went out nearly as far as Kingston, and wound up in the heart of the West End. I tried to persuade her to walk down Bond Street, but she shook her head.

"To tell you the truth," she confided, "I am not very fond of being seen upon the streets. You know how marvellously clever Dad is, but still, we have been talked about once or twice, and there are several people whom I shouldn't care about meeting."

I sighed as I looked out of the window towards the jewellers' shops.

"I should very much like," I said, "to buy you an engagement ring."

She laughed at me.

"You absurd person! Why, I am not engaged to you yet!"

"You are very near it," I assured her. "Anyhow, it would be an awfully good opportunity for you to show me the sort of ring you like."

She shook her head.

"Not to-day!" she decided. "Somehow or

other, I feel that if ever I do let you, you'll choose just the sort of ring I shall love without my interfering. Where did we say we'd pick Father up ? "

" Here," I answered, as the car came to a standstill outside the Café Bayard. " I'll go in and fetch him."

I found Mr. Parker seated at a table with two of the most villainous specimens of humanity I had ever beheld. They were of the same class as the men with whom he had been talking at the Milan, but still more disreputable. He welcomed me, however, without any sort of embarrassment.

" Just passing the time away, my dear fellow," he remarked airily. " Met a couple of acquaintances of mine. Will you join us in just one mixed vermouth ? "

" Miss Parker is outside in the car," I explained. " If you don't mind, I will go out and wait with her. You can join us when you are ready."

" Five minutes—not a moment longer, I promise," he called out after me. " Sorry you won't join us."

I took my place once more by Eve's side. Perhaps my tone was a little annoyed.

" Your father is in there," I said, " with two of the most disreputable-looking ruffians I have ever seen. What in the world induces him to sit at the same table with them, I cannot imagine."

"Necessity, perhaps," she remarked. "Very likely they are highly useful members of our industry."

Mr. Parker came out almost immediately afterwards. I suggested the Ritz for luncheon. They looked at one another dubiously.

"To be perfectly frank with you, my dear fellow," Mr. Parker explained, as he clambered into the car and took the place which I had vacated by his daughter's side, "it would give us no pleasure to go to the Ritz. We have courage, both of us, my daughter and I, as you have observed for yourself, but courage is a different thing from rashness. We have been enjoying a very pleasant and not unlucrative time for the last six weeks, with the—er—natural result that there are several ladies and gentlemen in London whom I would just as soon avoid. The Ritz is one of those places where one might easily come across them."

"The Carlton? Prince's? Claridge's? Berkeley?" I suggested. "Or what do you say to Jules'?"

Mr. Parker shook his head slowly.

"If you really mean that you wish me to choose," he said, "I say Stephani's."

"As you will," I agreed. "I only suggested the other places because I thought that Miss Parker might like a change."

We drove to Stephani's. It struck me that Branco's greeting was scarcely as cordial as usual. He piloted us, however, to the table usually occupied by Mr. Parker. On the way, he took the opportunity of drawing me a little apart.

"Mr. Walmsley, sir," he said, "can you tell me anything about Mr. Parker and his daughter?"

"Anything about them?" I repeated.

Branco nodded.

"That they are Americans, I know," he continued, "and that the young lady is beautiful—well, one has eyes. It is not my business to be too particular as to the private affairs of those who frequent my restaurant, but twice Mr. Parker has been followed here by a detective, and last night, as you know, they left practically under arrest. It is not good for my restaurant, Mr. Walmsley, to have the police so often around, and if Mr. Parker and his daughter are really of the order of those who pass their life under police supervision, I would rather they patronized another restaurant."

I only laughed at him.

"My dear Branco," I protested, "be careful how you turn away custom. Mr. Parker is, I should think, no better nor any worse than a great many of your clients."

"If one could but keep the police out of it," Branco observed. "Could you drop a word to

the gentleman, sir? Since I have seen them in your company, I have naturally more confidence, but it is not good for my restaurant to have it watched by the police all the time."

"I'll see what can be done, Branco," I promised him.

Mr. Parker was twice called up on the telephone during luncheon time. He seemed throughout the meal preoccupied, and more than once, with a word of apology to me, he and Eve exchanged confidential whispers. I felt certain that something was in the air, some new adventure from which I was excluded, and my heart sank as I thought of the grim possibilities overshadowing it. I watched them with their heads close together, Mr. Parker apparently unfolding the details of some scheme, and it seemed to me that, after all, the wisest thing I could do was to bid this strange pair farewell after luncheon, and return either to the country or cross over to Paris for a few days. And then a chance word, a little look from Eve, a little touch from her fingers as it occurred to her that I was neglected, made me realize the absolute impossibility of doing anything of the sort. For a person of my habits of life and temperament, I had certainly fallen into a strange adventure. Not only had Eve herself come to mean for me everything that was real and vital in

life, but I was most curiously attracted by her terrible father. I liked him. I liked being with him. He was a type of person whom I had never met before in my life, and whom I thoroughly appreciated. I sat and watched him during an interval of the conversation. Noticeably large, almost gross, he wore the strange-shaped collars favoured by his race, the quiet-patterned clothes, the unobtrusive tie. He must have been at least fifty years old, but his face was absolutely unwrinkled. His eyes were bright and clear. Geniality and humour were stamped upon his expression. "I am enjoying life," he seemed to say to everybody; "come and enjoy it with me." What a man to be walking the tightrope all the time, to be risking his character and his freedom day by day!

"By the by, Eve," Mr. Parker concluded, abandoning at last their half whispered conversation and leaning back in his place, "we shall have to run this little affair without our friend here, eh?"

She nodded.

"He won't mind."

"If there is anything more on hand," I said, trying to make my tone as little dejected as possible, "I should like to be in it."

Mr. Parker scratched his chin.

" I am not sure that you really enjoy these little episodes."

" Of course I don't enjoy them," I admitted indignantly. " You know that I hate them. I am miserable all the time simply because of what may happen to you and to Miss Eve."

Mr. Parker sighed.

" There you are, you see," he declared. " That's the one kink in your disposition, sir, which places you irrevocably outside the class to which Eve and I belong. Now let me ask you this, young man," he went on. " What is the most dangerous thing you've ever done ? "

" I was on Spion Kop," I told them. " I went out with a troop of Irregular Horse, and we had a roughish time."

" I honour you for it, sir," Mr. Parker replied ; " but I will not take that as an example. In the way of sport, I mean—something you didn't march nto as a man and a soldier, because it was your duty ? "

" I've played some tough polo," I remembered.

" That'll do," Mr. Parker declared. " Now tell me. When you turned out, you knew perfectly well that a broken leg or a broken arm, perhaps a cracked skull, was a possibility. Did you think about this when you went into the game ? Did you think about it when you were playing ? "

"Of course I didn't," I admitted.

"Just so," Mr. Parker concluded, triumphantly. "That's where the sporting instinct comes in. You know that a thing is going to amuse and excite you. Beyond that you do not think."

"But in this case," I persisted, "I think it your duty to think, for your daughter's sake."

Eve flashed upon me the first angry glance I had seen from her.

"I think," she decided coldly, "that it is not worth while discussing this matter with Mr. Walmsley. We are too far apart in our ideas. He has been brought up amongst a different class of people and in a different way. Besides, he misses the chief point. If I weren't an adventuress, Mr. Walmsley, I might have to become a typist, and Daddy might have to serve in a shop. Don't you think that we'd rather live—really live, mind—even for a week or two of our lives, than spend dull years, as we have done, upon the treadmill?"

"I give it up," I said. "There is only one argument left. You know quite well that the pecuniary excuse exists no longer."

She looked at me and her face softened.

"You are a queer person," she murmured. "You are so very English, so very set in your views, so very respectable, and yet you are willing to take us both——"

"I am only thinking of marrying you," I interrupted.

"Well, you were going to make Daddy an allowance, weren't you?"

"With great pleasure," I assured her vigorously, "and I only wish you'd take my hand now and we'd fix up everything to-morrow. We could go down and see my house in the country, Eve—I think you'd love it—and there are such things, even in England, you know, as special licences."

"You dear person!" she laughed. "I can't be rushed into respectability like this."

Perhaps that was really my first moment of genuine encouragement, for there had been a little break in her voice, something in her tone not altogether natural. If only we had been alone, if even another summons to the telephone had come just then for her father! Fortune, however, was not on my side. Instead, the waiter appeared with the bill and diverted my attention. Eve and her father whispered together. The moment had passed.

"Anything particular on this afternoon, Walmsley?" Mr. Parker asked, as he rose to his feet.

"Not a thing," I replied.

"I have just got to hurry off," he explained; "a little matter of business. Eve has nothing to do for an hour or so——"

"I'll look after her if I may," I interposed eagerly.

"Don't be later than half-past five, Eve," her father directed as he went off, "and don't be tired."

We followed him a few minutes later into the street. A threatened shower had passed away. The sky ahead was wonderfully soft and blue, the air filled with sunlight fragrant with the perfume of barrowfuls of lilac drawn up in the gutter. Eve walked by my side, her head a little thrown back, her eyes for a moment half closed.

"But London is delicious on days like this!" she exclaimed. "What are you going to do with me, Mr. Walmsley?"

"Take you down to the Archbishop of Canterbury and marry you," I threatened.

She shook her head.

"I couldn't be married on a Friday! Let us go and see some pictures instead."

We went into the National Gallery and wandered around for an hour. She knew a great deal more about the pictures than I did, and more than once made me sit down by her side to look at one of her favourite masterpieces.

"I want to go to Bond Street now," she said, when we left. "I think it will be quite all right at this time in the afternoon, and there are some weird things to be seen there. Do you mind?"

We walked again along Pall Mall. Passing the Carlton she suddenly clutched at my arm. A little stifled cry escaped her; the colour left her cheeks. We increased our speed. Presently she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Heavens, what an escape!" she exclaimed. "Do you think he saw me?"

"Do you mean the young man who was getting out of the taxicab?"

She nodded.

"One of our victims," she murmured; "Daddy's victim, rather. I didn't do a thing to him."

"I am quite sure that he didn't see you," I told her. "He was struggling to find change."

She sighed once more. The incident seemed to have shaken her.

"The worst of our sort of life is," she confided, "that it must soon come to an end. We have victims all over the place. One of them is bound to turn up and be disagreeable sooner or later."

"I should say, then," I remarked, "that the moment is opportune for a registrar's office and a trip to Abyssinia."

"And leave Daddy to face the music alone?" she objected. "It couldn't be done. Come along; I want to see the Post Impressionists before the light goes."

We saw the Post Impressionists—and wondered. Then I strolled up Bond Street with her, looking in at the jewellers' windows. I hinted as delicately as possible at a present, but she only laughed at me.

"I hate jewellery," she declared, "except just one or two things."

"I should never have believed it," I remarked, a little grimly.

"Horrid person!" she replied. "Don't you understand that it's the excitement of getting it that I really enjoy? For the rest—well, one must live. I am not extravagant."

She accepted a large box of chocolates and some flowers, which we had sent to Banton Street. Then we turned into a teashop and sat side by side in a remote corner of the place. I had made up my mind to say no more to her that day, but the opportunity was irresistible. There was a little desultory music, a hum of distant conversation, and Eve herself was thoughtful. I pleaded with her earnestly.

"Eve," I begged, "if only you would listen to me seriously! I simply cannot bear the thought of the danger you are in all the time. Give it up, dear, this moment—to-day. We'll lead any sort of life you like. We'll wander all over Europe—America, if you say the word. I am quite well

off enough to take you anywhere you choose to go, and still see that your father is quite comfortable. You've made such a difference in such a short time."

She was certainly quieter, and her tone was softer. She avoided looking at me.

"Perhaps," she said, "this feeling you speak of would pass just as quickly."

"There isn't any fear of that," I assured her. "As I care for you now, Eve, I must care for you always, and, you know, it's torture for me to think of you in trouble—perhaps in disgrace. As my wife you shall be safe. You'll have me always there to protect you. I should like to take you even farther afield for a time—to India or Japan, if you like—and then come back and start life all over again."

"You're rather a dear," she murmured softly. "I will tell you something, at any rate. I do care for you—a little—better than I've ever cared for anyone else, but I can't decide quite so quickly."

"Give up this adventure to-night," I begged. "I hate to mention it, Eve, but if money—I put my cheque-book in my pocket to-day. If your father would only——"

She stopped me firmly.

"After the things you have told me," she said, "I don't think that I could bear to have him take

your money to-day. I can't quite do as you wish, but what you have said shall make a difference, I promise you. I can't say more. Please drive me home now."

CHAPTER V

MR. SAMUELSON

IT was there in large type, the moment I opened my paper the next morning, the very announcement which I had dreaded to find :

DARING BURGLARY IN HAMPSTEAD

LADY LOSES TWO THOUSAND POUNDS' WORTH OF JEWELLERY

I read the particulars somewhat breathlessly. The burglary had taken place at the house of a Mr. and Mrs. Samuelson in Wood Grove, Hampstead. It appeared that a dinner-party had been given at the house during the evening, which had engaged the attention of the whole of the staff of four servants, and that for an hour or so the upper premises were untenanted. Upon retiring to rest, Mrs. Samuelson found that her jewel case and the whole of her jewellery, except what she was wearing, had been stolen. As no arrest had yet been made, the references to the affair were naturally guarded. The paragraph even concluded without the usual formula as to

the police having a clue. On the whole, I set the paper down with a slight feeling of relief. I felt it might have been worse!

I breakfasted at nine o'clock, after having read the announcement through again, trying to see if there was any possible connexion between it and my friends. Then I lit a pipe and sat down to wait until I could ring up 3771A Gerrard. About ten o'clock, however, my own telephone bell rang, and I was informed that a gentleman, who desired to see me, was waiting below. I told the man to send him up; in a moment or two there was a knock at my door. In response to my invitation to enter, a short, dark, Jewish-looking person, with olive complexion, shiny black hair and black moustache, presented himself. He carried a very immaculate silk hat, and he was dressed with great neatness. He had the air, however, of a man who is suffering from some agitation.

"Mr. Walmsley, I believe?" he asked. "Mr. Paul Walmsley?"

"That is my name," I replied, in a conventional way.

"Know you by hearsay quite well, sir," my visitor assured me, with a flash of his white teeth. "Very glad to meet you indeed. I have done business once or twice with your sister, the Countess of Aynesley—business in curios. You

know my place, I dare say, in St. James's Street. My name is Samuelson."

I could scarcely repress a little start, which he was quick to notice.

"Perhaps you've been reading about that affair at my house last night?" he asked.

"That is precisely what I have been doing," I admitted. "Please sit down, Mr. Samuelson."

I wheeled an easy chair up for him and placed a box of cigarettes at his elbow.

"Quite a mysterious affair," I continued. "It is almost the first burglary I have ever read of in which the police have not been said to possess a clue."

Mr. Samuelson, who seemed gratified by his reception, lit a cigarette and crossed his legs displaying a very nice pair of patent boots with grey suède tops.

"It is a very queer affair indeed," he told me confidentially. "The police have been taking a lot of trouble about it, and a very intelligent sort of fellow from Scotland Yard has been in and out of the house ever since."

"Any clue at all?" I asked.

"Rather hard to say," Mr. Samuelson replied. "You'll be wondering what I've come to see you about. Well, I'll just explain. Of course, there's always the chance that someone may have

entered the house while we were all at dinner—crept upstairs quietly, and got away with the jewel case. But this Johnny I was telling you about, from Scotland Yard, seems to have got hold of a theory which has rather knocked me of a heap. Very delicate matter," Mr. Samuelson continued, " as you will understand when I tell you that he thinks it may have been one of my guests who was in the show."

" Seems a little far-fetched to me," I remarked, " but one never knows."

" You see," Mr. Samuelson explained, " there's no back exit from my house without climbing walls and that sort of thing, and it happened to be a particularly light evening, as you may remember. There are policemen at both ends of the road, who seem unusually confident that no one carrying a parcel of any sort passed at anything like the time when the thing was probably done. This is where the Johnny from Scotland Yard comes in. He has got the idea into his head that the jewels might have been taken away in the carriage of one of my guests."

" Well," I remarked, " I should have thought you would have been the best judge as to the probability of that. You hadn't any strangers with you, I suppose ? "

" Only two " Mr. Samuelson replied. " We

were ten altogether," he went on, counting upon his fingers, "and a very nice little party, too. First of all, my wife and myself. Then Mr. and Mrs. Max Solomon—Solomon, the great fruiterers in Kensington, you know. Man worth a quarter of a million of money, and a distant connexion of my wife's—very distant, worse luck! Then there was Mr. Sydney Hollingworth, a young man in my office, but he don't count, because he stayed on chatting to me about business after the others had gone, and he was with us when the theft was discovered. Then there was my wife's widowed sister, Mrs. Rosenthal. We can leave her out. That's six. Then there was Alderman Sir Henry Dabbs and his wife. You may know the name—large portmanteau manufacturer in Spitalfields, and certain to be Lord Mayor before long. His wife was wearing jewellery herself last night, worth, I should say, from twenty to twenty-five thousand pounds, so my wife's little bit wouldn't do them much good, eh?"

"It certainly doesn't seem like it," I admitted. "So far, your list of guests seems to have been entirely reputable."

"The only two left," Mr. Samuelson concluded, "are an American gentleman and his daughter whom we met in the train coming up from Brighton—a Mr. and Miss Parker—a very delight-

ful gentleman, and most popular he was with all of us. The young lady, too, was perfectly charming. To hear him talk, I should have put him down myself as a man worth all the money he needed, and more; and the young lady had got a trick of wearing her clothes and talking as though she were a born princess. Real style, I should have said, both of them. Still, the fact remains that they came in a motor-car with two men-servants, that it waited for them, and that this detective from Scotland Yard—Mr. Cullen, I think his name is—has fairly got his knife into them."

"And now," I remarked, smiling, "you are perhaps coming to the object of your visit to me?"

"Exactly," Mr. Samuelson admitted. "The fact of it is that in the course of conversation your name was mentioned. I forget exactly how it cropped up, but it did crop up. Mr. Parker, it seems, has the privilege of your acquaintance; at any rate, he claims it. Now, if his claim is a just one, and if you can tell me that Mr. Parker is a friend of yours, why, that ends the matter, so far as I am concerned. I am not going to have my guests worried and annoyed by detectives, for the sake of a handful of jewels. I thank goodness that I can afford to lose them, if they

must be lost, and replace them this afternoon without feeling it. Now you know where we are, Mr. Walmsley. You understand exactly why I have come to see you, eh ? "

I pressed another cigarette upon him and lit one myself.

" I do understand, Mr. Samuelson," I told him, " and I appreciate your visit very much indeed. I am exceedingly glad that you came. Mr. Parker told you the truth. He is a gentleman for whom I have the utmost respect and esteem. I consider his daughter, too, one of the most charming young ladies I have ever met. I am planning to give a dinner-party within the course of the next few evenings purposely to introduce them to some of my friends with whom they are as yet unacquainted, and I am hoping that almost immediately afterwards they will be staying with my sister down in Suffolk."

" With the Countess of Aynesley," Mr. Samuelson said slowly.

" Certainly," I agreed. " I'm quite sure that my sister will be as charmed with them as I and many other of my friends are."

Mr. Samuelson rose to his feet, brushed the cigarette ash from his trousers, and took up his hat.

" Mr. Walmsley," he said, holding out his hand,

"I am glad that I came. You have treated me frankly and in a most gentlemanly manner. I can assure you that I appreciate it. Not under any circumstances would I allow friends of yours to be irritated by the indiscriminate inquiries of detectives. The jewels can go hang, sir."

He shook hands with me and permitted me to show him out, after which he marched down the corridor, humming gaily to himself, determined to have me understand that a trifling loss of two thousand pounds' worth of jewellery was in reality nothing. I stood for some time with my back to the fire, smoking thoughtfully. Then the telephone bell rang. My gloomier reflections were at once forgotten. It was Eve who spoke.

"Good morning, Mr. Walmsley!"

"Good morning, Miss Eve!" I replied.

"Are you very busy this morning?" she asked.

"Nothing in the world to do," I answered promptly.

"Then please come round," she directed, ringing off almost at once.

I was there in ten minutes. The hall-porter, who had not yet completed his morning toilet, conducted me upstairs. In the morning sunlight the whole appearance of the place seemed shabbier and dirtier than ever. Inside the sitting-room,

however, everything was different. My own flowers had apparently been supplemented by many others. Mr. Parker, as pink and white as usual, looking the very picture of content and good digestion, was smoking a large cigar and reading a newspaper. Eve was seated at the writing-table, but she swung around at my entrance and held out both her hands.

"The flowers are lovely," she murmured. "Do go and sit down and talk to Daddy while I finish this letter."

I shook hands with Mr. Parker. He laid down the newspaper and smiled at me.

"A pleasant dinner last night, I trust?" I inquired.

His eyes twinkled.

"Most humorous affair," he declared. "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

"From a business point of view——" I began dryly.

Mr. Parker shook his head.

"Mr. Samuelson's jewels," he complained, "were like his wines, all sparkle and outside—no body to them. Two thousand pounds, indeed! Why, we shall be lucky if we clear four hundred."

The man's coolness absolutely took me aback. For a moment I simply stared at him.

"He'll be round to see you this morning

some time about my character," Mr. Parker proceeded.

" He has already paid me a visit," I said grimly. " He was round at ten o'clock this morning."

" You don't say ! " Mr. Parker murmured.

He looked at me hopefully. His expression was like nothing else but the wistful smile of a fat boy expecting good news.

" Oh, of course I told him the usual thing ! " I admitted. " I told him you were a close personal friend, a sort of amateur millionaire, a person of the highest respectability—everything you ought to be, in fact. He has gone away perfectly satisfied, and determined to have nothing to do with the guest theory."

Mr. Parker patted me on the shoulder.

" My boy," he said, " I knew I could rely on you."

" I propose," I continued, elaborating upon the scheme which had come into my head on the way, " to do more than this for you. I am asking some friends to dine to-night whom I wish you and your daughter to meet. You will then be able to refer to other reputable acquaintances in London besides only myself."

Eve turned around in her chair to listen. Mr. Parker, whose first expression had been one of unfeigned delight, suddenly paused.

" My boy," he expostulated, " I don't want to take advantage of you. Do you think it's quite playing the game on your friends to introduce to them two people like ourselves? You know what it means."

" I know perfectly well," I agreed, " but as some day or other I am going to marry Eve, it seems to me that the thing might as well be done."

They were both perfectly silent for several moments. They looked at one another. There were questions in his face, other things in hers. I strolled across to the window.

" If you'd like to talk it over," I suggested, " don't mind me. All the same, I insist upon the party."

" It's uncommonly kind of you, sure," Mr. Parker said thoughtfully. " The more I think it over, the more I feel impressed by it. But, you know, there's something about the proposition I can't quite cotton to. Seems to me you've some little scheme of your own at the back of your head. You haven't got it in your mind, have you, that you're sort of putting us on our honour? "

" I have no ulterior motive at all, Mr. Parker," I declared, mendaciously.

Eve rose to her feet and came across to me. She was wearing a charming morning gown of some

light blue material, tight fitting, alluring, and there was a little quiver of her lips, a provocative gleam in her eyes, which I found perfectly maddening.

" I think we won't come, thank you," she decided.

" Why not ? "

" You see," she explained, " I am rather afraid. We might get you into no end of trouble with some of your most particular friends. There are one or two people, you know, in London, especially amongst the Americans, who might say the unkindest things about us."

" No one, my dear Eve," I assured her stolidly, " shall say anything to me or to anyone else about my future wife."

For a moment her expression was almost hopeless. She shook her head.

" I don't know what to do with him, Daddy ! " she exclaimed, turning towards her father in despair.

" I'm afraid you'll have to marry him, if he goes on," Mr. Parker declared gloomily. " That is," he added, as though he had suddenly perceived a ray of hope about the matter, " unless we get into trouble first."

" In the meantime," I ventured, " we will dine at eight o'clock at the Milan."

Mr. Parker groaned.

"At the Milan!" he echoed. "Worse and worse! We shall be recognized, for certain. There's a man lives there whom I did out of a hundred pounds—just a little variation on the confidence trick. Nothing he can get hold of, you understand, but he knows very well that I had him. Look here, my dear Walmsley, be reasonable. Hadn't you better drop this chivalrous scheme of yours, young fellow?"

"The dinner is a fixture," I replied firmly. "Can I borrow Miss Eve, please? I want to take her for a motor ride."

"You cannot, sir," Mr. Parker told me. "Eve has a little business of her own—or rather mine—to attend to this morning."

"You are not going to let her run any more risks, are you?"

Mr. Parker frowned at me.

"Look here, young man," he said, "she is my daughter, remember. I am looking after her, for the present. You leave that to me."

Eve touched me on the arm.

"Really, I am busy to-day," she assured me. "I have to do something for Daddy this morning—something quite harmless; and this afternoon I have to go to my dressmaker's. We'll come at eight o'clock."

"We'll come on this condition," Mr. Parker

suddenly determined. "My name is getting a little too well known, and it isn't my own, anyway. We'll come as Mr. and Miss Bundercombe, or not at all."

"Why on earth Bundercombe?" I demanded.

"For the reason that I have just stated," Mr. Parker said obstinately. "Parker isn't my name at all; and, between you and me, I think I have made it a bit notorious. Now there is a Mr. Bundercombe and his daughter who live far out in a western state of America, who've never been out of their own country, and who are never likely to set foot on this side. She's a pretty little girl, just like Eve might be, and he's a big, handsome fellow—just like me. So we'll borrow their names, if you don't mind."

"You can come without a name at all, so long as you come," was my final decision as I took my leave.

CHAPTER VI

THE PARTY AT THE MILAN

MY dinner-party, which I had arranged for in the Milan Restaurant, was, on the whole, a great success. My sister played hostess for me, and confessed herself charmed with Eve, as indeed was everyone else. Her father's stories kept his end of the table in continual bursts of merriment. One little incident, too, was in its way exceedingly satisfactory. Mr. and Mrs. Samuelson were being entertained by some friends close at hand, and appeared very much gratified at the cordiality of our greeting. I took wine with Mr. Samuelson during the evening, and I felt that so far as he was concerned, at any rate, not a shadow of suspicion remained in his mind as to my two guests.

We sat for a long time over dinner. Eve was between a cousin of mine—who was a member of Parliament, a master of fox-hounds, and in his way quite a distinguished person—and the old Earl of Enterdean, my godfather, and they were both of them obviously her abject slaves. No one seemed in the least inclined to move, and it was

nearly eleven o'clock before we passed into the private room which I had engaged, where coffee, liqueurs, and some bridge tables awaited us. We broke up there into little groups. I left Eve talking to my sister, and was on my way to try and get near her father when the Countess of Enterdean, a perfectly charming old lady who had known me from boyhood, intercepted me.

"My dear Paul," she said, "I cannot thank you enough for having given us the opportunity of meeting these most delightful Americans, and I really must tell you this. I had meant to keep it a secret, but from you I cannot. I knew all the time that the name of Bundercombe was familiar to me, and suddenly it came over me like a flash. Directly I asked Mr. Bundercombe in what part of America his home was, of course it was all clear to me. What a small world it is! Do you know," she concluded impressively, "that it was just these two people, Mr. Bundercombe and his daughter, who were so amazingly kind to Reggie when he was out in the States, on his way to Dicky's ranch?"

I was, for a moment, absolutely thunderstruck.

"Did you—er—remind Mr. Bundercombe of this?" I asked.

She shook her head. She had the pleased smile of a benevolent conspirator.

"I will tell you why I did not, Paul," she explained. "Reggie is in town just for a few days. I have sent him a telephone message, and he is wild with delight. He has only just arrived from Scotland, but I told him that Mr. Bundercombe and his daughter were here, and he is rushing into his clothes as fast as he can, and is coming round. It will be so delightful for him to meet them again, and I must really try and think myself what I can do to repay all their kindness to Reggie."

I felt completely at my wits' end. I saw the whole of my little scheme, which up to now had proved so successful, threatened with instant destruction. Lady Enterdean passed on, probably to take someone else into her confidence. I crossed the room to the little group which was surrounding my friend, and as soon as I got near him I touched him on the shoulder.

"Just one word with you, Mr. Bundercombe," I begged.

The little circle of men let him through with reluctance. I passed my arm through his and led him out towards the foyer.

"You seem," I declared bitterly, "to have chosen the most unfortunate personality! I wish to goodness you had remained Mr. Parker!

This infernal name of yours—Bundercombe—has got us into trouble."

"In what way?" he asked quickly.

"Lady Enterdean has just been to me," I told him. "She has a son who has been travelling in the States, and who was wonderfully entertained by two people of the name of Bundercombe in the very place you told me to say that you came from."

"Well, that goes all right," Mr. Parker remarked complacently. "We're getting the credit for it."

"Precisely," I admitted. "The only trouble is that Lady Enterdean has just telephoned to her son to come down at once and renew his acquaintance with you and Eve."

Mr. Parker whistled softly. His face had become a blank.

"My! We do seem to be up against it," he confessed uneasily.

"The young man," I continued, "will be here perhaps in ten minutes, perhaps sooner, prepared to grasp you both by the hand and exchange reminiscences."

Mr. Parker shook out a white silk handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead.

"Kind of warm out here," he remarked. "I'll just have to talk to Eve for a minute or two."

He had no sooner left me than I found myself compelled to attend to one or two of my guests whom I had seen little of at dinner. I kept looking anxiously around, and at last the blow fell. Lord Reginald Sidley was announced.

He looked eagerly around the room.

"Hope you don't mind my butting in, old chap," he said, as he shook hands with me. "The mater telephoned that old Bundercombe and his daughter were here, so I just rushed round as quick as I could. Regular bricks they were to me out West! . . . I don't see them anywhere."

I glanced around the room. Just at that moment a waiter from the restaurant presented himself. He brought me a card upon a salver.

"The gentleman asked me to give you this, sir," he announced.

I picked it up. On the back of a plain visiting card were a few hasty words, scrawled in pencil:

"So sorry, but Eve is not feeling quite herself, and begged me to take her home at once quietly. My respects and apologies to you and all your delightful guests."

I read it out and passed it to Reggie. His face fell.

"If that isn't a sell!" he exclaimed. "Fancy

your knowing them! Isn't Miss Bundercombe a topper?"

"She is certainly one of the most charming young women I have ever met in my life," I admitted.

"I am glad, at any rate," Lady Enterdean declared, "that they have found their way to London. I shall make a point of calling upon them myself to-morrow. Now, Paul, you must go and play bridge. They are waiting for you. Don't bother about me. I amuse myself quite well, strolling round and talking to my friends."

I made up a rubber of bridge, chiefly with the idea of distracting my thoughts. Presently, whilst my partner was playing the hand, I rose and crossed the room to the sideboard for some cigarettes. I found Lady Enterdean peering about with her lorgnette fixed to her eyes, apparently searching for something.

"Lost anything, Lady Enterdean?" I asked.

"A most extraordinary thing, my dear Paul," she declared, resting her hand on the bosom of her gown. "I am perfectly certain that it was there a quarter of an hour ago—my cameo brooch, you know, that old Sir Henry brought home from Italy."

"Too large to lose, anyway," I remarked cheerfully, as I joined in the search.

We pulled aside a table and I almost collided with one of my most distinguished guests—Sir Blaydon Harrison, K.C.B. Sir Blaydon, also, with an eyeglass in his eye, was moving discontentedly backwards and forwards and kicking the carpet with his feet.

" Silly thing," he observed, as he glanced up for a moment. " That little diamond charm of mine has slipped off from my fob. I saw it as we crossed the foyer from the restaurant."

" Why, what has happened to us all ! " my sister exclaimed from behind. " Look at me—I've lost my pendant ! Paul, did you give us too much wine to drink, or what ? "

I am not sure that this was not the most awful moment of my life ! A cold shiver of fear suddenly seized me. I looked from one to the other, speechless. If appearances had gone for anything at that moment I must indeed have looked guilty.

" Most extraordinary ! " I mumbled.

" Oh, the things will turn up all right, without a doubt," Lady Enterdean declared, good-humouredly. " Could we have a couple of waiters in and search properly, Paul ? My knees are a little too old for this stooping."

" If you'll please all wait for a few minutes," I begged earnestly, " I'll go out and make inquiries.

Sir Blaydon, take my place in that rubber of bridge, there's a good fellow. I'll have the restaurant searched, too. Don't mind if I am away a few minutes."

I hurried out. As soon as the door of the private room was closed, I made for the entrance of the restaurant as fast as I could sprint. Without hat or coat I jumped into a taxi, and in less than ten minutes I was mounting the stairs of No. 17, Banton Street, with the hall porter blinking at me from his office. I scarcely went through the formality of knocking at the door. Mr. Parker and Eve were both standing at the table, their heads close together. At the sound of my footsteps and precipitate entrance, Mr. Parker swung round. One hand was still behind him. Upon the table a white silk handkerchief was lying.

"My dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "My dear Walmsley! what has happened?"

I opened my lips and I closed them again. It really seemed impossible to say anything! Mr. Parker's expression had never been so boyish, so earnest, and yet so wistful. Eve was quivering with some emotion the nature of which I could not at once divine. I felt very certain, however, that she had been remonstrating with her father.

"Don't keep us in suspense, my dear fellow," Mr. Parker implored. "What has gone wrong?

Eve and I were just—just talking over your delightful party."

"And looking over the spoils!" I said grimly.

I came a little farther into the room. Mr. Parker, with a sigh, abandoned his position. He unclosed the fingers of his hand and removed the silk handkerchief. I looked upon the table at my aunt's brooch, my sister's pendant, and Sir Blaydon Harrison's diamond pig. I said not a word. I looked at them and I looked at Mr. Parker. He smiled weakly and scratched his chin.

"I didn't do so badly," he essayed apologetically. "To tell you the truth, I really hadn't meant——"

"Never mind what you meant!" I interrupted. "Please give me those things back again at once."

Eve dropped them into the handkerchief, twisted them up and passed them across to me.

"I told Daddy it was rather a mean trick," she sighed, "but really, you know, no people ought to carry about their valuables like that. It was trying us a little too high, wasn't it? And, dear Reggie, did he arrive?"

For the first time since I had known her I was angry with Eve.

"If you will allow me," I said, "I will pursue this conversation to-morrow morning."

I tore downstairs, jumped into the waiting

taxi, and returned to the Milan. I entered the sitting-room with a grave face. Evidently I was only just in time. The rubber of bridge had been broken up, and my guests were standing about in little groups, talking. I closed the door behind me and held up my hand.

"Blanche," I announced, "Lady Enterdean, I have recovered everything."

"My dear boy, how wonderfully clever of you!" Lady Enterdean exclaimed. "How relieved I feel! Most satisfactory, I am sure."

She sat down promptly. There was a little murmur of voices. They gathered around me. I drew a long breath and continued on my mendacious career.

"I have been closeted with the manager," I explained. "It was one of the under-waiters—the little dark one who brought in the coffee. The temptation seems to have been too much for him. He confessed directly he was questioned. He has restored everything, and I thought it best to have him simply turned off without any fuss. Here is your pig, Sir Blaydon; your pendant, Blanche; your brooch, Lady Enterdean. I am exceedingly sorry that you should have had any anxiety—but all's well that ends well," I wound up weakly.

I went to the sideboard and helped myself to a

stiff whisky and soda. Everyone was talking cheerfully. The great topic now was one of ethics—had I acted properly in not charging the waiter? Fortunately, someone discovered, a little later, that it was twelve o'clock, and my little party broke up.

CHAPTER VII

"ONE OF US"

I WAS not altogether surprised to receive on the following morning, before I had finished breakfast, a visit from Reggie.

"Cheero!" he said brightly, as he seated himself in my easy chair and tapped the end of one of my cigarettes upon the tablecloth. "I haven't been up so early for months, but I had to find you before you went out. About these Bundercombes."

"What about them?"

"I want their address, of course," Reggie continued. "The mater wants to call this afternoon, and I'm all for seeing Miss Bundercombe again. Ripping girl, isn't she?"

"Then prepare yourself for a disappointment, my young friend," I advised, glancing at the clock. "They left for Paris by the nine o'clock train this morning."

Reggie stared at me blankly.

"Gone already?"

I nodded and invented a little difficulty with my coffee-pot.

"Theirs was only a flying visit," I explained. "I was lucky to get hold of them for my dinner."

"I'm hanged if I understand this!" Reggie remarked, looking at me suspiciously. "Why, I spent the best part of three weeks with them in that God-forsaken hole out West, and they were as keen as mustard upon my taking them round London. How long have they been here?"

"Not long," I answered. "Sure you won't have some coffee?"

Reggie ignored my invitation.

"They've got my address, and there are the directories," he continued. "The funny part of it is, too, that I heard from Mrs. Bundercombe a week or so ago, and she never said a word about any of them coming over."

"They seem to have made their minds up all of a sudden," I explained. "They spoke of it as quite a flying trip."

Reggie coughed, and stared for a moment at the end of his boot.

"Can't understand it at all," he repeated. "Devilish queer thing, anyway! I say, Paul, you're sure it's all right, I suppose?"

"All right? What do you mean?"

"Between you and me," he went on, "don't give it away outside this room, you know—but

there have been rumours going about concerning an American and his pretty daughter over here —regular wrong 'uns. They've been up to all sorts of tricks, and only kept out of prison by a fluke."

" You're not associating these people, whoever they may be, with Mr. and Miss Bundercombe ? " I asked sternly.

Reggie gazed once more at the point of his boot.

"The thing is," he remarked, " are your friends Mr. and Miss Bundercombe at all ? "

" Don't talk rot ! "

" It may be rot," Reggie admitted slowly, " or it may not. By the by, where did you meet them ? "

" If you don't mind," I answered, " we won't discuss them any longer."

" At least," Reggie insisted, " will you tell me this—where they have been staying in London ? I shall go there and see whether they have left any address for letters to be forwarded."

" I shall tell you nothing," I decided. " As a matter of fact, I am finding you rather a nuisance."

Reggie picked up his hat.

" There is something more in this," he said didactically, " than meets the eye ! "

" Tell me exactly what you mean ? " I insisted.

"This," Reggie pronounced, with emphasis. "You're either so keen on the girl yourself that you don't want me to meet her, knowing that I made the running with her out there; or you've been had, and you don't want the story to get about."

"Machiavellian!" I scoffed. "Be off, Reggie!"

* * * * *

I had tea with Eve that afternoon, and I broached the subject of Reggie's visit as delicately as I could.

"You remember Lord Reggie Sidley?" I asked.

"Lord Reggie what?" Eve exclaimed.

"Sidley," I repeated firmly. "He spent three weeks with you out at your home in Okata. His threatened arrival last night was the reason of your father's precipitate retreat, and yours."

"Oh, that young man," Eve remarked airily. "Well, what about him?"

"He has been round to see me this morning," I told her; "wanted your address."

She sighed.

"London will be getting too hot for us soon," she murmured. "Am I engaged to him or anything?"

It seemed to me that this was carrying frivolity

too far. I set down my teacup and spoke to her firmly.

" Eve," I said in a serious voice, " when are you going to let me announce our engagement ? "

" Our what ? " she demanded, with wide-open eyes.

" Engagement," I repeated. " I have proposed to you two or three times. I will do it again if you like."

" Pray don't ! " she begged. " You are not going to tell me, are you," she added, still looking at me with wide-open eyes, " that I accepted you ? "

" You haven't refused me," I pointed out.

" If I haven't," she assured me, " it has been simply to save your feelings."

I waved her statement on one side.

" Rubbish ! You know quite well that you are going to accept me some time or another. You have some foolish feeling about enjoying your liberty. Liberty, indeed ! I only wish I could make you understand the absolute madness, the blind folly, of some of your present proceedings."

" I shouldn't try," she murmured sweetly. " Do have some more tea."

I gulped down a little storm of rising indignation.

" You must marry some time, Eve," I said ; " there isn't anyone in America, is there ? "

"There are a great many," she assured me. "It was to get away from them as much as anything that I came over with Father on this business trip."

"Business trip!" I groaned.

Eve was disposed to be a little fractious.

"Oh, I dare say it all seems very disgraceful to anyone like you, you who were born with plenty of money, and who have never been obliged to earn any, and who have mixed with respectable people all your life!" she exclaimed. "All the same, let me tell you that there are plenty of charming and delightful people going about the world earning their living by their wits, simply because they are forced to. There is more than one code of morals, you know."

I flatter myself that at this point I was tactful.

"My dear Eve," I reminded her, "you forget that I have joined the gang—I mean," I corrected myself hastily, "that I have offered to associate myself with you and your father in any of your enterprises. I am perfectly willing to give up anything in life which you may consider too respectable. At the same time, I must say that there are limits so far as you are concerned."

She pouted a little.

"I hate being out of things," she said.

"No need for you to be altogether," I con-

tinued. "Now if I could institute a real big affair in the shape of a bucket shop or long firm swindle, in which your father and I could play the principal parts and you become merely a subordinate, such as a typist or something—what about that, eh?"

"It doesn't sound very amusing for me," she objected. "How much should we make?"

"Thousands," I assured her, "if it were properly engineered."

"I think," she said reflectively, "that Father would be very glad of a few thousands just now. He says that the market over here for such little trifles as we have come across is very restricted."

I groaned under my breath. In imagination I could see Mr. Parker bartering with some shady individual for Lady Enterdean's cameo brooch! I reverted to our previous subject of conversation.

"Eve," I went on, "I hate to seem tedious, but the question of our engagement still hangs fire!"

"You persistent person!" she sighed. "Tell me, if I married you, would all those people whom we met last night be nice to me?"

"Of course they would," I assured her. "They are only waiting for a word from you. I think that they must have an idea already. I am not in the habit of giving dinner-parties with a young lady as guest of honour."

She was thoughtful for a few moments, and her eyes lit up with reminiscent humour.

"Dear me," she murmured, "if only they knew! They hadn't any suspicions, I suppose, about those—those little trifles?"

"None," I replied. "I put it all on to a waiter."

"How clever of you! You really do seem a most capable person—and so masterful! I begin to fear that some day you'll have your own way."

Her eyes laughed at me. There was something softly provocative in them—a new and kinder light. I bent over her and kissed her. She sat quite still.

"Mr. Walmsley!"

"It's usual amongst engaged couples," I pleaded.

"Is it?" she remarked coldly. "Doesn't the man, as a rule, wait to be quite sure that he is engaged?"

"Not in this country," I declared. "I have heard that Americans are rather shy about those sort of things. Englishmen——"

"Oh, bother Englishmen!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot. "I don't believe a word I've ever heard about them. I suppose now I shall have to marry you."

"I don't see any way out of it," I agreed readily.

She held up her finger. The door was quietly opened. Mr. Parker entered. He was dressed in the height of fashion—a loose morning coat, an immense expanse of white waistcoat, a silk hat set rather far back upon his mammoth head. He wore pearl-grey gloves, and in his hand he carried a large silver-headed cane. He was followed by the most utterly objectionable and repulsive-looking person I have ever set eyes upon in my life—a young man, thin and of less than medium height, flashily dressed in cheap clothes, with patent boots and brilliant neck-tie. His cheeks were sallow, and his eyes, deep inset, were closer together than any I can remember to have seen. When he removed his hat, which he did with a flourish directly he saw Eve, he displayed a wealth of curly black hair upon which a Mile End hairdresser appeared to have done his worst.

"My dear," Mr. Parker exclaimed, "let me present Mr. Moss—my daughter, sir; Mr. Walmsley—also one of us. I have been privileged," Mr. Parker continued, dropping his voice a little, "to watch Mr. Moss at work this afternoon, and I can assure you that a more consummate artist I have never seen—in Wall Street, on a racecourse meeting, or anywhere else."

Mr. Moss smiled deprecatingly and jerked his head sideways.

"The old 'un's pretty fly," he remarked, as he laid his hat upon the table.

I was immensely relieved to find that Mr. Parker's last exploit was not accepted by Eve in exactly the spirit which he seemed to expect. She drew back from the proffered hand of Mr. Moss and contented herself with an only moderately amiable little nod.

"I am very glad to know Mr. Moss, of course," she said, "but I am not in the least in sympathy with the—er—branch of our industry which he represents. You know, Daddy, it's much too dangerous and not a bit remunerative."

Mr. Parker was busy at the sideboard, preparing whiskies and sodas for himself and his new friend.

"To a certain extent, my dear," he admitted, "I am with you. Not all the way, though. One needs, of course, to discriminate. Personally, I must admit that the nerve and actual genius required in finger manipulation has always attracted me."

Mr. Moss paused with his glass half-way up to his lips. He jerked his head in the direction of Mr. Parker.

"He is one for the gab, ain't he?" he remarked confidentially to me.

For the life of me, at that moment, I could not tell whether to leave the room in a fit of angry disgust, or to accept the ludicrous side of the situation and laugh. Fortunately for me, perhaps, I caught Eve's eye, in which there was more than the suspicion of a twinkle. I chose, therefore, the latter alternative. Mr. Moss watched us, for a moment, curiously.

"What might your line be, guv'nor?" he asked, as he set down his glass.

"Oh, anything that's going," I replied carelessly. "City work is rather my speciality."

"I know!" Mr. Moss exclaimed quickly. "Slap-up offices, thousands of letters a day full of postal orders, shutters up suddenly, and bunko! Fine appearance for the job," he added admiringly.

Eve sat down and began to laugh softly to herself. She had a way of laughing almost altogether with her eyes, in a style which expressed more genuine enjoyment than anything I have ever realized. She rocked herself gently backwards and forwards. Mr. Moss looked at us both a little suspiciously.

"Seem to be missing the joke a bit, I do," he remarked.

Eve sat up, and was instantly grave.

"It is your clear-sighted way of putting

things," she explained softly. "You seem to understand people so thoroughly."

"I don't generally make no mistake about the number of beans in the game," Mr. Moss observed, in a self-congratulatory tone. "I can tell a crook from a mug a bit quicker than most."

"I have suggested to Mr. Moss, my dear," Mr. Parker intervened, turning towards us with beaming face, "just a little early dinner—say at Stephani's—just as we are, you know. Will this be agreeable to you?"

"Certainly," Eve assented promptly.

"Mr. Moss will tell us some of his little adventures," Mr. Parker continued, with satisfaction. "Considering that he has had twelve years' continual work, I think you'll all agree with me that his is a wonderful record. He has been compelled to enter into a little involuntary—er—retirement only once during the whole of that time."

Mr. Moss looked a little puzzled.

"He means lagged, don't he?" he remarked, a light breaking in upon him. "Only once in my life, and that for a trifling beano—a lady's bag and a couple of wipes. I tell you it's no joke, nowadays, though. They do watch you. The profession ain't what it was."

" You will come with us, won't you, Mr. Walmsley ? " Eve begged, turning to me.

" I shall be delighted," I answered, with strenuous mendacity. " Did you say Stephani's, or what do you think of one of these places closer at hand ? I was told of a little restaurant in Soho the other day where the cooking is remarkable."

" I'm all for Stephani's," Mr. Moss declared, grinning, " and the sooner the better. One of the neatest pieces of business I ever did in my life I brought off there, in the old bar. To tell you the truth, I'm getting a bit peckish."

" There is no reason," Mr. Parker agreed, " why we should not dine at once. It is very nearly seven o'clock. What do you say ? "

" Yoicks ! Tally-ho for the grub ! " Mr. Moss exclaimed with spirit.

We started off, four in a taxi. It was Mr. Moss who, with florid politeness, handed Eve to her seat, and it was Mr. Moss who entertained us with light conversation on the way !

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE ALHAMBRA

BRANCO'S face, when he met us at the entrance of the restaurant, was a study. His polite bow and smile of welcome seemed suddenly frozen upon his face as his eyes fell upon Mr. Moss. Mr. Moss was still wearing his hat, which was a black bowler with a small brim, set at a jaunty angle a little on one side and affording a liberal view of his black curls underneath. His linen failed to stand completely the test of the clear, soft light of the restaurant, and one might have been excused certain doubts with regard to the diamond pin in his mauve tie, and the ring which flashed from his not over-white hand as he tardily removed his head-gear.

"Bit of all right, this place," Mr. Moss remarked, handing his hat to Branco. "Who'll have a short one with me before we feed?"

Branco, completely aghast, passed the hat from the tips of his fingers to a subordinate. He showed us to a table quite silently, handed the menu over to a *maître d'hôtel*, and promptly departed. Looking a little nervously around

I could see him from his sanctum gazing at us over the top of the blind!

"Mr. Moss, I see, has American tastes," Mr. Parker declared. "He likes an *apéritif* before dinner. Leave it to me, please. I will order four cocktails."

Mr. Parker also ordered a somewhat extensive dinner, and fine champagne. Throughout the meal we listened to a series of adventures, in which the hero was always Mr. Moss. We heard of wonderful hauls and wonderful escapes, detectives outwitted, exploits which reminded me more of the motor bandits of Paris than our own sober capital. Mr. Parker's attention never flagged. Half-way through the meal, Mr. Moss suddenly set down his knife and fork. He broke off in the middle of a fascinating narration of an episode during which he had jiu-jitsued one detective, knocked another down, locked them in an empty room, and strolled away with a cigar abstracted from the case of one of them, and his pockets full of uncut emeralds. With his mouth wide open, he was gazing fixedly across the room. There was a considerable change in his tone.

"'Ware 'tec!" he said sharply.

We all looked in the direction he indicated, and we all recognized Mr. Cullen, who was apparently returning with interest our observation. I saw

a grim smile upon his lips as he disappeared for a moment behind the menu card. For a man who had in his time treated detectives in such a cavalier way Mr. Moss's change of colour and subdued manner were a little extraordinary. He cheered up, however, after he had drained another glass of champagne.

"Our friend Cullen," Mr. Parker murmured, "seems to have taken quite a fancy to this restaurant."

"Used to be on my lay," Mr. Moss remarked. "He's much too big a duke now for the street, though. They say he gets nearly all the high-class forgery and swindling cases."

"We have come into contact with him ourselves," Mr. Parker observed genially. "Seems to me that there's a kind of want of snap about him, compared with our American detective, but I dare say he knows his business."

"Is your father really enjoying this?" I whispered to Eve.

"He absolutely loves it," she replied.

I sighed.

"And I think," she added suddenly, "that you are behaving beautifully, and I almost love you for it."

I looked at her quickly, and I felt rewarded for all that I had gone through. Her attitude

towards me was subtly different. Somehow, I felt that I was being permitted a glimpse of the real Eve. Her eyes were soft, she patted my hand under the table. I could almost have shaken hands with Mr. Moss! I was moved to folly.

"What about a music-hall afterwards?" I proposed in the fullness of my heart. "Shall I send for stalls at the Alhambra?"

My giddy proposal was received with unanimous approval. Our departure from the restaurant, a few minutes later, evoked almost as much comment as our arrival. Mr. Moss led the way, his hands in his trousers pockets, and a very large cigar, pointing almost towards the ceiling, protruding from the corner of his mouth. His slight uneasiness with regard to the whereabouts of his hat having been dispelled by its appearance before we had finished our liqueurs, he placed it on his head at its usual angle before we left the room. Mr. Parker took his arm as they passed out, and I saw Mr. Cullen's eyes follow them from behind his newspaper. The two got into a taxi, and Eve and I followed them in another, an arrangement which Mr. Moss appeared to regard with disfavour. Eve's hand stole into mine as we drove off.

"Do you know," she said seriously, "I think

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"Do you know," she said seriously, "I think

it's perfectly horrid to drag you about in such company. It's all very well for us, because we belong and we are in a strange city, but I saw some of your friends look at you and whisper. They must think you are mad."

" So long as you are in it, dear," I assured her, " I don't care where I go, or with whom."

" You don't look like that a bit, you know," she sighed.

" As for the rest," I went on, " if you are really sorry for me, why then, end it. Your father could spare us for a little time."

I could see that she was becoming serious again. Lights flashed in upon her face. I felt a sudden wave of pity mingled with my love for her. After all, there were times when her anxiety must have been almost insupportable.

" Eve, dearest," I whispered, " you must let me take you away from this. You must ! You are too good and sweet ever to mix with these people, to live this life. Why do you hesitate even for an hour ? "

She half closed her eyes for a moment. When she looked at me again she was laughing.

" You're a dear boy," she said. " Now help me out, please. We have arrived."

We found four stalls reserved for us near the front at the music-hall, and after we had settled

a slight preliminary difficulty owing to Mr. Moss's reluctance to part with his hat, settled down to enjoy the performance. Mr. Moss seemed a little disappointed, too, that his bright and snappy order for drinks to the powdered official who showed us to our places was not at once executed, but otherwise he made himself very much at home. We had perhaps been there for about half an hour when I saw a sudden change in his demeanour, which was almost at once reflected in the serious expression which had stolen into Mr. Parker's benign countenance. An old gentleman, white-haired, with rubicund face and a jovial air, had taken the seat next to them. He had the appearance of having come from the country and having spent a happy day in town. Even from where I sat, I could see protruding from his breast-pocket a brown leather pocket-book. I watched them as though fascinated. The change in Mr. Moss was amazing. His reckless air of enjoyment had departed. He was still smoking, but he was all alert, like a cat ready to spring. Mr. Parker, too, was interested. I saw him whisper something in Mr. Moss's ear, and I felt a cold foreboding of what was going to happen.

" I'm for a drink," Mr. Moss declared, in rather a loud tone. " Come on, guv'nor."

They both rose. The old gentleman drew in his legs to let them pass. Although I watched with fixed eyes, I was absolutely unable to follow their movements, but when they had passed the old gentleman, I could see from where I sat that his pocket-book had gone.

"Did you see that?" I whispered to Eve.

She shook her head.

"The old gentleman's pocket-book," I groaned, "they've got it!"

Eve, for a moment, sat quite still. She, too, seemed nervous. I was looking away again at the retreating figures of Mr. Parker and Mr. Moss. Suddenly my heart sank. I saw the old gentleman spring to his feet and hurry after them, and I saw, too, at the end of the line of stalls, Mr. Cullen and a companion standing waiting. I rose quickly to my feet.

"I'm afraid there's going to be some trouble," I said to Eve. "Let me go and see if I can help. It looks as though the whole thing were a trap."

I followed quickly. It is only fair to Mr. Cullen to say that he conducted the affair with great discretion, and with every consideration for the feelings of the management. He stopped Mr. Parker and Mr. Moss as they reached the end of the line of stalls.

"Please come with me," he said. "I have something to say to you outside."

Mr. Moss showed signs of an attempt to escape. He stooped for a minute, as though to run, but a kick from Mr. Parker induced him to alter his mind.

"Wotcher want?" he asked belligerently.

The old gentleman had now reached them, red-faced and incoherent. He addressed himself to Mr. Cullen, and I no longer had any doubt whatever but that the affair was a plant of the detective's.

"I've been robbed of my pocket-book!" he exclaimed. "One of these two has got it—brushed up against me just now, on their way out of the stalls. Someone fetch the manager!"

Only a few people in the immediate vicinity were conscious that anything at all unusual was happening. The promenade just at that spot was almost deserted.

"This gentleman is certainly mistaken," Mr. Parker declared, with dignity. "Neither my friend nor myself knows anything about his pocket-book."

"I am sorry," Mr. Cullen said politely, "but I shall have to trouble you to come with me to Bow Street at once, and you, sir," he added, addressing the old gentleman. "I am a police

officer, and we will go into the matter there. You will agree with me that it is well not to make a disturbance here. I have two assistants with me."

He indicated with a little gesture the two men who had emerged from somewhere in the background.

"I will go with you, with the utmost pleasure," Mr. Parker consented. "At the same time, this gentleman has obviously been drinking, and his charge is absurd."

It was precisely at that moment that I felt something hard pressed against my right hand. With a dexterity which was nothing short of miraculous, Mr. Parker, who apparently was standing with his hands in his pockets, had suddenly forced one of them through some secret opening in his coat. In those few seconds it seemed to me that I lived for a year. I had no time to think, no time to realize that, if I failed, nothing could save my appearance at Bow Street on the following morning as a common pickpocket. I gripped the pocket-book from his hand, and without changing a muscle I dropped it into the yawning overcoat pocket of the bibulous gentleman. The moment was over and past. Mr. Parker, with a movement forward, had covered my proceedings. I had been face

to face with death years before, but I had never felt quite the same thrill.

"This way, gentlemen, if you please," Mr. Cullen directed softly.

"You will not object to my accompanying you?" I asked.

"Certainly not," Mr. Cullen replied; "in fact, I am not sure that it would not be my duty to ask you to come."

"One moment," I begged.

Mr. Cullen paused.

"The gentleman who has made this charge," I went on, "seems to me to be in a very uncertain condition. Might I suggest that before you commit yourself to taking these people to the police station you just make sure that he really has been robbed of his pocket-book?"

"Had it here," the old gentleman declared, "right in this pocket. Look for yourself—gone!"

"The gentleman scarcely seems to me," I remarked, "to be in a fit condition to know which pocket it was in."

Mr. Cullen, who had been walking carefully between him and the other two, smiled in a superior way.

"Please feel in all your pockets," he told his accomplice.

The old gentleman obeyed. Suddenly he

stopped short. A blank expression came into his face.

"What have you got there?" I asked.

He brought it out with an ill-concealed reluctance. It was, without doubt, the pocket-book. I shall never forget Mr. Cullen's face! He was bereft of words. He stared at it as though he had seen it come up through the floor. Mr. Moss simply stood with his mouth open. Mr. Parker alone appeared unmoved by any emotion of surprise. His manner was serious, almost dignified.

"I want you to take this from me straight, Mr. Cullen," he said grimly. "I am not a man who loses his temper easily, but you are trying us a bit high."

Mr. Cullen remained, for a moment or two, speechless. He looked at me and drew a long breath. I knew perfectly well what he was thinking. He had had a man on either side of Mr. Parker and Mr. Moss. The only person who could have transferred that pocket-book was myself. I could see him readjusting his ideas as to my moral character.

"Mr. Parker—gentlemen," he said, removing his hat, "pray accept my best apologies. You are free to return to your seats whenever you choose. This gentleman was evidently mistaken," he

added, speaking with withering sarcasm and turning sharply to his coadjutor. "You oughtn't to come to these places in your present condition, sir. Take my advice and get along home at once."

The bucolic gentleman, who had completely lost his appearance of insobriety, mumbled a few incoherent words and departed. Mr. Parker assumed a more genial attitude.

"Well, well, I suppose you only did your duty, sir," he remarked, with a resigned sigh. "We were on our way to the bar. Will you join us, Mr. Cullen?"

I did not hear the reply, but somehow or other we all drifted there. Mr. Moss found an easy chair, which he pronounced to be "a bit of all right," and in which he assumed an easy and elegant attitude. Mr. Parker, Mr. Cullen and I completed the circle. The former insisted upon a bottle of champagne to show that there was no ill-feeling. We solemnly clinked glasses—the professional gutter-thief, the disappointed detective, Mr. Parker, and myself. It was a unique moment in my life!

* * * * *

The champagne affected the spirits of no one except, perhaps, Mr. Moss, and him, when we

broke up, we thought it advisable to get rid of. To my surprise, Mr. Parker seemed in a particularly despondent frame of mind. He needed pressing even to come to supper.

"You are quick-witted, Walmsley," he admitted, as we rolled away in the car; "quick-witted, I admit that, but you were dead clumsy with your fingers. I could see what you were doing from the back of my head."

"Really!" I murmured. "Well, I suppose that sort of thing is a gift. I only know that I hope I may never have to do it again."

Mr. Parker sighed.

"I fear," he said, "that your troubles with us will soon be over. Eve has been telling me about that young idiot of an Englishman who visited the Bundercombes out in Okata. If there was one man whose name I thought I was safe to make use of, it was Joe Bundercombe."

"It seems," I admitted, "to have been an unfortunate choice. What do you think of doing about it?"

Mr. Parker apparently had no immediate answer ready for me. During our brief ride in the motor and the early stages of supper, he was affected by a taciturnity which made him as a companion almost negligible. And then suddenly a light broke over his face. He had the ap-

pearance of a shipwrecked mariner who suddenly sees land in the offing. His lips were a little parted, his boyish face all aglow. He filled our glasses.

"Walmsley, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, "Eve, dear, the problem is solved! Raise your glasses and drink with me. Drink farewell to Mr. and Miss Joseph H. Parker. Drink a welcome to Mr. and Miss Bundercombe of Okata!"

We clinked glasses.

"That's all very well," I said, "but Reggie will be on your track."

Mr. Parker set down his glass—empty.

"We shall see," he declared didactically.

CHAPTER IX

THE EXPOSURE

THE next morning at twelve o'clock I took a taxicab round to Banton Street. The hall-porter, who was beginning to know me well, seemed a little surprised at my appearance.

"Is the young lady upstairs?" I asked.

He was distinctly taken aback.

"They've gone," he told me.

I stopped on my way to the stairs.

"Gone?" I repeated.

"Went off this morning," he continued; "two taxicabs full of luggage."

"Aren't they coming back?"

"No signs of it."

"Did they leave any address?"

"None!"

"Are you sure?" I persisted. "Please ask at the office."

The porter left me for a moment, but returned shaking his head.

"Mr. Parker said that there would be no messages or letters, and accordingly he left no address."

I turned slowly away. The hall-porter followed

me. He was drawing something from his waistcoat pocket.

" I wouldn't do a thing," he declared, " to get Mr. Parker into any trouble, for a nicer, freer-handed gentleman never came inside the hotel; but I don't know as there's much harm in showing you this, seeing as you're a friend. I picked it up in the sitting-room after they'd gone."

He held out a cablegram. Before I realized what I was doing, I had read it. It was handed in at New York:

" Look out. H. sailed last Saturday."

" Pretty badly scared of ' H.,' he was," the hall-porter remarked. " Ten minutes after that cablegram had come they were hard at it, packing."

I gave the man a tip and drove back to my rooms, where I spent a restless morning, lunched at my club, and returned to the Milan afterwards only in the hope that I might find there a note or a message. There was nothing, however. Just as I was leaving to go out, the telephone bell rang. I took up the receiver. It was Eve's voice.

" Is that Mr. Walmsley ? "

" It is," I admitted. " How are you ? "

" Quite well, thank you."

" Still in London ? "

"Certainly. Would you like to come and have tea with me?"

"Rather!" I replied enthusiastically. "Where are you?"

"Hiding!"

"That's all right," I replied. "I shan't give it away. Where shall I be able to find you?"

"Well," she said, "we talked it over, and we decided that the best hiding-place was one of the larger hotels. We are at the Ritz."

"I'll come right along, if I may."

"Very well," she agreed. "Ask for Mr. Bundercombe."

I groaned under my breath, but I made no further comment, and in a very few minutes I presented myself at the Ritz Hotel. I was escorted upstairs, and was ushered into a very delightful suite upon the second floor. Eve rose to meet me from behind a little tea-table. She was charmingly dressed and looking extraordinarily well. Mr. Bundercombe, on the other hand, who was walking up and down the apartment with his hands behind his back, was distinctly nervous. He nodded at my entrance.

"How are you, Walmsley?" he said. "How are you?"

"I am quite well, sir, thank you," I replied, a little stupefied.

"Say, I'm afraid we are making a great mistake here," he went on anxiously. "We've slipped a point too near to the wind this time."

"If you'll allow me to tell you exactly what I think," I ventured, "frankly, I think that you have made a mistake. There's that matter of Reggie Sidley. He was worrying me all yesterday morning to find out where you were, and when I evaded the point he told me straight that he didn't believe you were the Bundercombes at all. He is always in and out of this place, and if he sees your name in the register, or his mother, Lady Enterdean, sees it, it seems to me it's about all up."

"A piece of bravado, I must admit," Mr. Parker muttered; "a piece of absolute bravado. But there's the young woman who's responsible," he added, shaking his fist at Eve. "I may have suggested our coming to your party as the Bundercombes, but it was Eve's idea that we put up this little piece of bluff. Now I'm all for Paris," he went on insinuatingly.

At that moment I felt that there was nothing I wanted so much as to get Eve away from the Ritz, and I fell in with the scheme.

"We'll all go," I suggested. "I haven't had a week in Paris for ages."

Eve handed me my tea.

"Don't count me in," she begged. "I never felt less inclined to move from anywhere. If being Eve Bundercombe means living at the Ritz, I think I'd rather go on. The life of an adventuress is, after all, just a little strenuous, and I am tired of living on the thin edge of nothing."

"Perhaps before you know where you are," Mr. Bundercombe remarked gloomily, "you'll be living on the thin edge of a little less than nothing."

There was a knock at the door. We all looked at one another. A magnificent person with powdered hair, breeches and silk stockings, presented himself.

"Lord Reginald Sidley!" he announced.

In walked Reggie. He was correctly attired for calling, and he carried a most immaculate silk hat in his hand. He paused to shake his fist at me, and advanced towards Eve with both hands outstretched.

"At last I have found you then!" he exclaimed. "Miss Bundercombe! Well, I am glad to see you."

"Hallo, Reggie!" she answered sweetly. "What a time you've been looking us up!"

He was taken aback.

"Well, I like that!" he gasped. "And—how are you, Mr. Bundercombe?"

"Glad to see you," Mr. Bundercombe replied, cheerlessly.

The meeting had taken place and I seemed to be the only person in the room who was suffering from any sort of shock. Reggie was still holding one of Eve's hands and was almost incoherent.

"Come, I like that! I like that!" he exclaimed. "A long time looking you up, indeed! Why didn't you let me know you were here? There hasn't been a line from you or from your father. We couldn't believe it when we heard you had been at the dinner the other evening. I was never so disappointed in my life."

I gripped Mr. Bundercombe by the arm and led him firmly on one side.

"Look here," I said, "is your name Bundercombe?"

"It is," he admitted gloomily.

"Are you a millionaire?" I persisted.

"Multi!" he groaned.

"Then what the blazes—what the——"

I stopped short. Once more the door was opened. If Mr. Bundercombe had seemed anxious and depressed before, it was obvious now that the worst had happened. All the cheerful life seemed to have faded from his good-humoured face. He had literally collapsed in his clothes. Even Eve gave a little shriek. Upon the threshold

stood Mr. Cullen, and by his side a lady who might have been anything between fifty and sixty years old. She was dressed in a particularly unattractive check travelling suit, with a little satchel suspended from a shiny black leather band round her waist. She wore a small hat which was much too juvenile for her, and from the back of it a blue veil, which she had pushed on one side, hung nearly to the floor. Her complexion was very yellow, she had a square jaw, and through her spectacles her eyes glittered in most unpleasant fashion. Her greeting was scarcely conciliatory.

"So, I've got you at last, have I? Say, this is a pretty chase you've led me! Do you know I've had to desert my post as President of the Great Amalgamated Meeting of the Free Women of the West, to come and look after you two? Do you know that three thousand women had to listen to a substitute last Thursday, and after I'd spent two months getting up my facts? Do you know that you're the laughing-stock of Okata?"

She laid her umbrella down upon the table, and stood there with her fingers resting lightly upon it in the attitude of an orator.

"No one asked you to come, Mother," Eve remarked, with a sigh.

"Asked me to come, indeed!" the newcomer retorted. "Look at you both! I've heard all about your doings. This gentleman by my side has told me a few things. I'll talk to you presently, young woman. But say, is there anyone on the face of this earth such a miserable, addle-headed lunatic as that man whom it's my misfortune to call my husband!"

She shook her fist at Mr. Bundercombe, who seemed to have become still smaller. Then she looked at me, and at Reggie, who was standing with his mouth wide open. She fixed upon us as her audience.

"Look at him," she went on, stretching out her hands. "There's a respectable American for you! For thirty years he works as a man should—for it's what a man's made for—and, thanks to his wife's help and advice, he prospers. Look at him, I ask you! A baby can see that he hasn't the brains of a chicken. Yet there he stands—Joseph H. Bundercombe, of Bundercombe's Reapers, with eight million dollars' worth of stock to his name."

I saw Reggie's eyes go up to the ceiling, and I knew he was dividing eight million dollars by five. An expression almost of reverence passed into his face as he achieved the result. We none of us felt the slightest inclination to interrupt.

Mrs. Bundercombe's long skinny forefinger drew a little nearer to her victim. She looked down towards the table with the air of one expecting to find a glass of water there. Then she coughed—the short dry cough of the professional speaker—and continued.

"Wouldn't you believe that that was success enough for any reasonable mortal! Wouldn't you say that with a wife holding an honoured and great position in the State, and his daughter by his side, he'd settle down out there and live a respectable, decent life? Not he! First of all he wants to travel. What use is travel, I'd like to know, to people like him and me, with every moment of our time occupied and a duty unfulfilled to be written upon the slate every day? So down went my foot on travel! What does he do then but take up what he calls a hobby. He buys and gloats over every silly detective story that was ever written, practises disguises and making himself up, as he calls it, takes lessons in conjuring, haunts the police courts, consorts with criminals—in short, behaves like a great overgrown child. The time came when it was necessary for me to put down my foot once and for all. I called him to me. 'Joseph Henry Bundercombe,' I said, 'there must be an end to this.' 'There shall be,' he

promised. The next day he and Eve, my misguided stepdaughter, were on their way to Europe, and I am credibly informed, cheated a commercial traveller at cards on the way to New York. That I find him at liberty now, it seems to me, is entirely owing to the clemency and kindness of this gentleman, who recognized my description at Scotland Yard and brought me here."

"Say, all I'm prepared to admit about that is that it was somehow fortunate," Mr. Bundercombe remarked, with a sudden revival of his old self, "that it fell to my lot to have Mr. Cullen investigate some of my small adventures!"

Mr. Cullen was torn between his reverence for a multi-millionaire and his not unnatural indignation.

"Mr. Bundercombe," he said severely, "I think that you will do well to listen to your wife and to take her advice. There are one or two of these little affairs, you must remember, which are not entirely closed yet."

Mr. Bundercombe sighed. He adopted an attitude of resignation.

"Well, Cullen," he replied, "if my career of crime is really to come to an end, I don't want to bear you any ill-will. We'll just take a stroll downstairs and talk about it."

Mrs. Bundercombe, with a quick movement to the left, blocked the way.

"That means a visit to the bar," she declared. "I know you, Mr. Bundercombe! You'll just stop here and listen to a little more of what I've got to say. Who this gentleman may be I don't at present know," she went on, turning suddenly upon me, "but I am agreeable to listen to his name if anyone has the manners to mention it."

"Walmsley, madam," I told her quickly, "Paul Walmsley. I have the honour to be engaged to marry your stepdaughter."

Mrs. Bundercombe looked at me in stony silence. Twice she opened her lips, and I am quite sure that if words had come they would have been unkind ones. Twice apparently, however, her command of language seemed inadequate.

"So you're going to marry an Englishman,' she said, glaring at Eve, "when there's Seth Hankey and Congressman Bowles, and half a dozen more of them there, capable, good American citizens, ready to take you back, notwithstanding this disgraceful escapade."

"I am going to marry Mr. Walmsley, Mother, Eve agreed sweetly. "He has been such a kind friend to us during the last few days, and I rather fancy that I shall like living on this side."

"Dear me! Dear me! I haven't heard of this," Mr. Bundercombe remarked with interest. "You and I will go downstairs and have a little chat about it, Mr. Walmsley."

He made another strategic movement towards the door, which was promptly and effectually frustrated by his wife.

"No, you don't!" Mrs. Bundercombe prohibited. "I've a good deal more to say yet. I haven't been dragged over the ocean four thousand miles to have you all slip away directly I arrive. A nice state of things, indeed. My husband, Joseph H. Bundercombe, a suspect at Scotland Yard, followed everywhere by detectives; and my daughter——"

"Stepdaughter, please," Eve here interrupted.

"Stepdaughter, then!—talking about marrying a man she's probably known about twenty-four hours and met at a bar or a thieves' kitchen or something of the sort! If you must marry an Englishman," she continued, "why don't you marry Lord Reginald Sidley here? His father is an earl, any way."

"His uncle's one," Reggie put in gloomily jerking his head towards me. "Old Walmsley's all right."

Eve patted his hand.

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"His uncle's one," Reggie put in gloomily jerking his head towards me. "Old Walmsley's all right."

Eve patted his hand.

"Good boy," she said. "You know I never encouraged you, did I, Reggie?"

"Encouraged me!" he protested. "I think upon the whole you said the rudest things to me I ever heard in my life—from a girl, anyway. I imagine," he added, taking up his hat, "that it's up to me to leave this little domestic gathering."

"I'll see you out," Mr. Bundercombe declared with alacrity.

Mrs. Bundercombe, with her eyes steadily fixed upon her husband, stepped back until she blocked the doorway.

"My dear Hannah——"

"Your dear nothing!" she interrupted ruthlessly. "You've got to just sit down by the side of your daughter there, and let me tell you both what I think of you, and what I'm going to do about it."

Now I was sorry for Mr. Bundercombe, but there had been times when his exploits had caused me an amount of uneasiness which for years afterwards I could only recall with a shiver. Besides, this was his Nemesis, and nothing which I could do was likely to help him. I crossed the room to Eve, therefore, and whispered in her ear.

"I think," I suggested, "a little taxi drive. Your mother and father no doubt have a great

deal to say to one another, and you can receive your little lecture later."

Eve assented at once, and Mrs. Bundercombe, for some reason or other, only entered a faint protest against our departure. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon, and the streets were crowded with every description of vehicle. The sun was still warm, there was a faint pink light in the sky, a perfume of lilac in the air from the window-boxes and flower-barrows. I took Eve's fingers in mine and held them. I think she knew that something in the nature of an inquisition was coming, for she sat very demurely, her eyes fixed upon the road ahead.

" Eve," I asked, " how about Mrs. Samuelson's jewels ? "

" They were returned to her from ' a repentant criminal,' " Eve murmured.

" And the forged bank-notes made by the young man in the Adelphi ? "

" They were all destroyed as fast as father could buy them," she explained. " He has found the boy a post now with some printers in America."

" And the two thousand pounds at the gaming club that first night ? "

" Daddy made it three and sent it to a hospital. He thought it would do them more good."

I turned and looked at her. Her eyes had drooped underneath her lashes.

" You know you are a shocking pair," I said severely.

She looked up. Her lips, after all, were a little tremulous.

" Paul," she sighed, " you never can know how dull it was at Okata."

" I'm jolly glad it was," I told her. " It gives me a better chance, doesn't it ! "

" And we'll give Daddy a good time whenever we can ? " she pleaded.

" Always," I promised. " He's one of the best."

" He's so clever, too ! "

I glanced at her suspiciously, recalling one or two incidents.

" Clever, without a doubt," I admitted, " only I think, perhaps, we might get him to use his talents in a more orthodox way. By the by," I added, putting my head out of the window, " I think it's getting a little chilly."

I ordered the taxi to be closed, and we returned to the Ritz in about an hour. The hall-porter drew me on one side confidentially.

" Mr. Bundercombe and the other gentleman, sir," he announced, " are waiting for you in the bar."

CHAPTER X

A BROKEN PARTNERSHIP

BY what certainly seemed to be at the time a stroke of evil fortune, I invited Mrs. Bundercombe and Eve to lunch with me at Prince's Restaurant. Mrs. Bundercombe was graciously pleased to accept my invitation, but she did not think it necessary to alter in any way her usual style of dress for the occasion. We sailed into Prince's therefore, Eve charming in a lemon-coloured foulard dress and a black toque, and Mrs. Bundercombe in an Okata dressmaker's conception of a tailor-made gown in some hard, steel-grey material, and a hat whose imperfections were perhaps mercifully hidden by a veil, which instead of providing a really reasonable excuse for its existence by concealing some portion of Mrs. Bundercombe's features, streamed down behind her nearly to her feet.

The *maître d'hôtel*, who welcomed me and showed us to our table, found his little flow of small talk arrested by that first glimpse of our companion. He accepted my orders in a chastened manner, and

I noticed his eyes straying every now and then as though in fearsome fascination to Mrs. Bundercombe. She talked with Eve in a high nasal voice upon the absurd food invariably offered in English restaurants, and then suddenly her flow of language ceased—the bombshell fell. Mrs. Bundercombe's face became unlike anything I have ever seen or dreamed of. Even Eve's eyes were round, and her expression dubious. I turned my head. Some three tables away, Mr. Bundercombe, with a large bottle of wine in a pail by his side, was lunching with a young lady, a stranger to us all. She was, alas! not only a stranger to us all, but, although she was remarkably good-looking, there were indications that she was not of the set from which Mr. Bundercombe might have been permitted without criticism to select a luncheon companion.

We all three of us remained silent for a moment. Then I coughed and took up the wine list.

"What would you like to drink, Mrs. Bundercombe?" I asked.

Mrs. Bundercombe adjusted her spectacles severely and transferred her regard to me. I felt somehow as though I were back at school, discovered in some ignominious escapade.

"You are aware, Paul," she replied, "that I drink nothing save a glass of hot water after my

meal. The subject of drink does not interest me. I appeal to you now as a future member of the family. Fetch Mr. Bundercombe here."

"Mrs. Bundercombe," I said, leaning over the table, "your husband, during his stay in London, plunged freely into the Bohemian life of our city. I will answer for it that he did so simply in pursuance of that hobby which we all know of. I am convinced——"

"Paul," Mrs. Bundercombe interrupted, her voice a little more nasal even than usual, "will you fetch Mr. Bundercombe here, or must I rise from my seat in a public place and remove him myself from—from that hussy?"

I appealed to Eve.

"Eve," I begged, "please reason with your stepmother. There are certain situations in life which can be faced in one way only. Mrs. Bundercombe will, no doubt, have a few words to say to her husband on his return. Let her keep them until then."

"Paul is right," Eve declared. "Do take our advice," she continued, turning on her stepmother. "Let us eat our luncheon quite calmly. I am perfectly certain that Dad will have some very good reason to give for his presence here with that young lady."

Mrs. Bundercombe pursed her lips and rose to

her feet. I hastened to follow her example. We stood confronting one another.

"It is you or I, Paul," she insisted.

"Then it had better be I," I groaned.

I deposited my napkin on the table and made my way towards Mr. Bundercombe. I smiled pleasantly at him, and I bowed apologetically towards his companion.

"Sorry," I said under my breath, "but I am afraid Mrs. Bundercombe means to make trouble."

Mr. Bundercombe looked at me with a gloriously blank expression. His manner was not without dignity.

"I regret to hear," he replied, "that any person of the name of Mrs. Bundercombe is looking for trouble. I scarcely see, however, how I am concerned in the matter. You have the advantage of me, sir."

I stared at him and stooped a little lower.

"She's tearing mad," I whispered. "You don't want a scene. Couldn't you make an excuse and slip away?"

Mr. Bundercombe frowned at me. He glanced at the young lady as though seeking for some explanation in her face.

"Is this young gentleman known to you, Miss Blanche?" he inquired.

She set down her glass and shook her head.

"Never saw him in my life," she declared. "What's worrying him?"

"Hitherto," Mr. Bundercombe said, "my somewhat unusual personal appearance has kept me from an adventure of this sort, but I clearly understand that I am now being mistaken for someone else. Your references to a Mrs. Bundercombe, sir, are Greek to me. My name is Parker—Mr. Joseph H. Parker."

"Do you mean to keep this up?" I protested.

Mr. Bundercombe beckoned to the *maître d'hôtel*, who came hastily to his side.

"Do you know this gentleman?" he asked.

The *maître d'hôtel* bowed.

"Certainly, sir," he answered, with a questioning glance towards me. "This is Mr. Walmsley."

"Then will you take Mr. Walmsley back to his place," Mr. Bundercombe begged. "He persists in mistaking me for someone else. I am not complaining, mind," he added affably, "no complaint whatever. I am quite sure that the young gentleman is genuinely mistaken, and does not mean to be in any way offensive. Only my digestion is not what it should be, and these little contretemps in the middle of lunch are disturbing. Run away, sir, please," he concluded, waving his hand towards me.

The *maître d'hôtel* looked at me and I looked at

the *maître d'hôtel.* Then I glanced at Mr. Bundercombe, who, quite unruffled, had stretched out his hand for the bottle by his side, a design on his part which was at once frustrated by a hurrying wine steward. Finally, I bowed slightly towards the young lady and returned to my place.

"Well?" Mrs. Bundercombe snapped.

"It seems," I said, "that we are mistaken. That isn't Mr. Bundercombe at all."

Mrs. Bundercombe's face was a study.

"Is this a jest?" she demanded severely.

I sighed.

"I wish it were," I replied. "Anyhow, Mrs. Bundercombe, you must really excuse me, but there is nothing more which I can do. The gentleman whom I addressed insisted upon it that his name was Mr. Joseph H. Parker. No doubt he is right. These likenesses are sometimes very deceptive."

Mrs. Bundercombe rose to her feet. I made no effort to stop her; in fact, her action filled me with pleasurable anticipations. She walked across to the table at which Mr. Bundercombe was seated. Eve and I both turned in our places to watch.

"Poor Daddy!" Eve murmured under her breath. "Why couldn't he have chosen a smaller restaurant? He is going to catch it now!"

"I think I'll back your father," I observed. "He is quite at his best this morning."

The exact words which passed between Mr. Bundercombe and his wife we, alas! never knew. She turned her left shoulder pointedly towards the young woman whom she had designated as a hussy, and she talked steadily for about a minute and a half at Mr. Bundercombe. The history of what followed was reflected in that gentleman's expressive face. He appeared to listen at first in amazement, afterwards in annoyance, and finally in downright anger. When at last he spoke, we heard the words distinctly.

"Madam," he said, "I don't know who you are, and I object to being addressed in a public place by ladies who are strangers to me. Be so good as to return to your seat. You are mistaking me for someone else. My name is Mr. Joseph H. Parker."

For a lady who had won renown upon the platform as a debater Mrs. Bundercombe seemed afflicted with considerable difficulty in framing a suitable reply, and whilst she was still a little incoherent, Mr. Bundercombe summoned softly the *maître d'hôtel*. It may have been my fancy, but I certainly thought that I saw a sovereign slipped into the hand of the latter.

"Charles," Mr. Bundercombe confided, "my

luncheon is being spoilt by people who mistake me for a gentleman who, I believe, does bear a singular resemblance to me. My name is Parker. This lady insists upon addressing me as Mr. Bundercombe. I do not wish to make a disturbance, but I insist upon it that you conduct this lady to her place and see that I am not disturbed any more."

The *maître d'hôtel's* attitude was unmistakable. Within the course of a few seconds Mrs. Bundercombe was restored to us. I thought it best to ignore the whole matter, and I plunged at once into gastronomic matters.

"I have ordered," I began, "some Maryland chicken——"

"Then you can eat it," Mrs. Bundercombe snapped. "Not a mouthful of food do I take in this place with that painted hussy sitting by Joseph's side a few feet away. Champagne, too! Oh, I'll champagne him when I get him home!"

She drew a little breath between her teeth, but she was as good as her word. She refused all food and sat with her arms folded, glaring across at Mr. Bundercombe's table. My admiration for that man of genius was never greater than on that day. So far from hurrying over his luncheon, he seemed inclined to prolong it. I saw another bottle replace its empty companion in the ice pail, an occurrence which I really thought would have

been too much for Mrs. Bundercombe. There was no lack of conversation between the two. They even lingered over their coffee and liqueurs, and they were still at the table when Eve and I had finished, and Mrs. Bundercombe was sipping the hot water—the sole thing which had passed her lips. I paid the bill and rose. Mrs. Bundercombe, after a moment's hesitation, followed us.

"Eve and I thought of going into the Academy for a few minutes," I said tentatively, as we reached the entrance hall.

Mrs. Bundercombe plumped herself down on a chair within a yard of the door.

"I," she announced, "shall wait here for Joseph."

I realized the futility of any attempt to dissuade her, so we left her there, spent an hour at the Academy, and did a little shopping. On our way back an idea occurred to me. We re-entered the restaurant. Mrs. Bundercombe was still sitting in a corner of the hall.

"Thinks he can tire me out, perhaps," she remarked, in an explanatory manner. "Well, he just can't, that's all!"

I moved a few steps farther in and glanced down the restaurant. Then I returned.

"But, my dear Mrs. Bundercombe," I said, "your husband has gone long ago. He went out

the other way. I am not sure, but I believe that we saw him in Bond Street quite three-quarters of an hour ago."

"There is another way out?" Mrs. Bundercombe asked hastily.

"Certainly there is," I told her, "into Jermyn Street."

"Why was I not told?" she demanded, rising unwillingly to her feet.

"Really," I assured her, "I didn't think of it."

She followed us out. We all walked down Piccadilly.

"Will you be so good," she said, "as to direct me to a tea-shop?"

I pointed one out to her. She left us without a word of farewell. Eve and I turned down into the Haymarket.

"Nice example your parents are setting us," I remarked.

Eve sighed.

"I wish I knew what Dad's up to," she murmured.

At that moment we met him. He came strolling along, his silk hat a little on the back of his head, a cigar in his mouth, his hands grasping his cane behind his back.

"Bundercombe or Parker?" I inquired, as we came to a standstill on the pavement.

He grinned.

"Nasty business that," he remarked cheerfully. "Why don't you keep to the Ritz or the Berkeley? Anyway," he added, his tone changing, "I'm glad I met you, Paul. I want your help in a little matter."

I shook my head.

"Quite out of the question," I declared emphatically.

"Don't forget that Paul is my future husband, Dad," Eve said severely. "You mustn't attempt to bring him into any of your affairs."

"On this occasion," Mr. Bundercombe expostulated, "I am on the side of the law. Mr. Cullen, whom I am probably going to see presently, will be my brother-in-arms."

"What do you need me for then?" I asked.

"As to absolutely needing you, perhaps I don't," Mr. Bundercombe admitted. "On the other hand, it's a very interesting little affair, and one in which you could take a hand without compromising yourself."

"What about Eve?" I inquired.

"Not this time," Mr. Bundercombe replied. "The only risk there is about the affair," he explained, "is that it is just possible there might be a bit of a scrap."

"What's the programme?" I asked.

" To-night, at home, at ten o'clock. Can you manage it ? "

" Rather," I answered, " if Eve doesn't mind. This is the night you promised to go with your mother to a lecture somewhere, isn't it ? " I reminded her.

She nodded.

" Very well," she consented resignedly, " as long as you don't let him get hurt, Dad."

" No fear of that," Mr. Bundercombe declared cheerfully. " If they go for anyone, they'll go for me. So long, young people. At ten o'clock, Paul."

At precisely the hour agreed upon that evening, I presented myself at Mr. Bundercombe's new home in Prince's Gardens. I noticed that the manner of the servant who admitted me was subdued and there was a peculiar gloom about the place. Very few lights were lit, and the farther portion of the house, of which one could catch a glimpse from the little circular hall, seemed entirely deserted. I was shown into Mr. Bundercombe's study upon the ground floor. Mr. Bundercombe was seated at a writing-table with his face towards the door. He greeted me with a friendly nod, and pointed to a little table upon which stood an abundant display of refreshments of all sorts.

"Try a liqueur, Paul," he suggested. "That's some of the old brandy at your elbow."

I helped myself and lit a cigarette.

"May I know something of the programme?" I asked.

"Spoil the whole show," Mr. Bundercombe objected earnestly. "Just play the part of assistant audience, and stick this into your pocket, will you?"

He threw towards me a very small revolver which he had produced from a drawer.

"Only the last three chambers are loaded," he remarked. "You'll have to click three times if you do use it. I don't think you'll need to, though. Take a stall and watch the fun. I'll only tell you this. You remember Bone Stanley, as he was called in those days, the man who was sent to prison for fifteen years for bank robbery and for shooting the manager? Down Hammersmith way, it was. The fellow was an American. Do you recall the affair?"

"I remember it quite well," I assented. "He was tried for murder and convicted of manslaughter."

Mr. Bundercombe nodded.

"He was released this afternoon. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"Here?" I exclaimed.

Mr. Bundercombe nodded. Coupled with a certain gravity of expression, he had the appearance of a schoolboy for whom a feast was being set out.

"Quite a pleasant little evening we are going to have," he promised. "You wait!"

I frowned a little uneasily.

"You are quite sure that you're not letting me in for——"

Mr. Bundercombe plunged into the middle of my little protest.

"You're all right, Paul," he assured me. "Cullen's in the house at the present moment, and two detectives with him. They are letting me run this thing, simply because I know more about it than they do, and for certain reasons I'm not giving my whole hand away. Don't you worry, Paul. You'll be all right this time. Listen."

We heard a feeble ring at the bell. Mr. Bundercombe nodded.

"That's Stanley," he whispered. "Sit down."

A man was shown into the room a moment later. I leaned forward in my chair so as to see more distinctly the hero of one of the most famous cases which had ever been tried in a criminal court. Of his renowned good looks there was little left. He stood there, still tall, with a pronounced stoop, high cheek-bones, furtive eyes, and

long mouth. He wore good clothes, his linen was irreproachable, and he kept his gloves on. Nevertheless, the stamp of prison was upon him.

"Mr. Stanley," Mr. Bundercombe said. "Good! I am glad that you were prevailed upon to come."

"I am still wholly in the dark as to what this means," the newcomer remarked.

"I'll tell you in a very few sentences," Mr. Bundercombe promised. "Will you sit down?'

"I prefer to stand," Stanley replied, "until I know exactly in whose house I am, and what your interest in me is."

"Very well," Mr. Bundercombe agreed, "here is my history. My name is Joseph H. Bundercombe. I am an American manufacturer. I have made a fortune manufacturing Bundercombe's Reaping Machines. You may call it a hobby, if you like, but I have always been interested in criminals and criminal methods—not the lowest type, of course, but men who have pitted their brains against others and robbed them. As soon as I arrived in this country, I found an interest in inquiring into the identities of American criminals imprisoned over here, with a view to helping any deserving cases. Your name came before me. I studied your case. I became interested in it. I learnt that your time was

almost up. A chance inquiry revealed to me a state of things which I determined to bring before your knowledge."

"You sent me a telegram," Mr. Stanley interrupted, "as I was stepping on the steamer at Southampton. I have returned to London for your explanation."

"You will probably," Mr. Bundercombe remarked genially, "be thankful all your life that you did. Now listen."

"Who is this person?" Mr. Stanley asked, indicating me.

"He is my prospective son-in-law, Mr. Paul Walmsley," Mr. Bundercombe explained, "and is in my confidence. I have asked him to be present because I may need a little support, and also because it may help to convince you that I am in earnest. Twenty years ago, Mr. Stanley, you came to the conclusion that honest methods were of little use to anyone seeking to make a large fortune. You joined with two other men, Richard Densmore and Philip Harding, in a series of semi-criminal conspiracies. You pooled all your money—you had the most—and you determined that if you could not make a living honestly, you would rob those with less brains than yourself. When half your capital was gone, this Hammersmith Bank robbery was planned and took place.

You were the only one caught, and you held your tongue like a man, but all the same you were made a cat's-paw of."

"In what way?" Stanley asked softly.

"You all three had revolvers, you all three arranged that they should be uncharged. Cartridges were put into yours without your knowledge. You held up your revolver and pressed the trigger, believing it to be empty. The others knew better. You shot the bank manager, and in the stupefaction which followed you became an easy captive. The others escaped."

Stanley moved a little on his feet. His lips were slightly parted, his eyes fixed upon Mr. Bundercombe.

"What story is this you are telling me?" he muttered.

"A true one," Mr. Bundercombe continued. "Now listen. The total funds in the possession of your two confederates when you went into prison were under a thousand pounds. You heard from them periodically as struggling paupers. Harding met you out of prison. He was almost in rags. They were at the end of their resources, he told you. He gave you a hundred pounds, to procure which he assured you with tears in his eyes that they had almost beggared themselves. It was to enable you to leave the country and

make a fresh start. You were even grateful. You shook him by the hand. You only left him at the hotel at Southampton an hour before you got my telegram."

"What of it?" Stanley asked.

"Nothing, except this," Mr. Bundercombe concluded. "Your two partners were so scared at the result of the Hammersmith affair, and at your sentence, that they turned over a new leaf. They went into business as outside stockbrokers, with your capital. The agreement as to third profits was still in force. They had what I can only describe as the devil's own luck. I should say that their total capital to-day is at least fifty thousand pounds. The time came for you to be released. They had no idea of parting with the third of their money and taking you into the business. All the time they had deceived you. They continued the deception. Harding met you as a poor man. But for me, you would be on your way to South Africa by this time, with a hundred pounds in your pocket."

"Is this the truth?" Stanley demanded.

"Absolutely," Mr. Bundercombe declared. "I stumbled across the truth in making inquiries concerning you and your probable future. I had meant, as a matter of fact, to put up a little money of my own to give you a fresh start. In

the course of these inquiries, I came across a young woman who had been a typist in Harding's office. It was from her I learned the truth. As he rose in the world, Harding seems to have treated the girl badly. A little kindness and a little attention on my part, and I learned the truth. She placed me in possession of the whole story after we had lunched together to-day."

Stanley at last took the chair which he had so long refused. He sat with his arms folded.

"And I kept my mouth closed," he muttered. "It was their job. I would no more have pulled the trigger of my revolver than I would have shot myself, if I had known. It was they who put the cartridges there! My God!"

He sat for a moment quite still. Mr. Bundercombe rang the bell.

"The gentlemen whom I am expecting," he said, "will be here in a moment. You can show them in directly they arrive."

The man bowed and withdrew. Mr. Bundercombe turned to his visitor.

"I have made the acquaintance," he continued, "of these two men—your late partners—sought them out and made it purposely. They are coming here to see me to-night. They fancy that it is just a friendly call. They know that I have money to invest. I have even made use of them,

employed them to buy for me bonds of my own choosing. They think that it is an affair of a bottle of champagne, perhaps, and a restaurant supper. Pull yourself together, Stanley. Go into that corner, behind the curtain. Wait your time."

Stanley rose slowly to his feet. His face was drawn as though with pain.

"It isn't so much the money," he muttered, "only I thought—I fancied that they would have been there to meet me, to shake me by the hand, to stay with me. And they wanted to push me off out of the country."

He opened his lips a little wider and swore, softly but vindictively. Then the bell rang. Mr. Bundercombe hastened to push him out of sight. We heard the sound of strange voices in the hall. When the door was opened it was obvious that the whole house was lit up. From somewhere in the distance came the soft music of a piano. Mr. Harding and Mr. Densmore were announced. I looked at them curiously. They were both most correctly dressed in evening clothes. They both had somehow the hard expression of worldly men, tempered not altogether pleasantly by symptoms of good living. They greeted Mr. Bundercombe with bluff heartiness. He gave them each a hand.

"Now, my friends," he said, "welcome to my

house. What shall it be before our little supper, eh? What do you say to a bottle, Paul?" he added, turning to me; "let me introduce my two friends—Mr. Harding and Mr. Densmore—Mr. Paul Walmsley."

They greeted me with more than affability. Mr. Harding assured me he had read my speeches. Mr. Densmore thought no one was more to be envied than a man who had the gifts which might secure for him a seat in Parliament. They chose champagne, and drank with gusto.

"It's early yet," Mr. Bundercombe declared genially. "Let's sit down. Perhaps we can manage another bottle. One between four's nothing. Sit down and tell me a little about English business. It interests me. You bought those Chilian bonds all right, I see. They are up an eighth to-night."

"A good purchase, Mr. Bundercombe," Mr. Harding assured him, "a very good purchase. After all, though, there's not much money to be made out of these government things. Now we've a little affair of our own—what do you say, Densmore?" he broke off, looking towards his partner. "We could afford to let Mr. Bundercombe come in a little way with us, I think?"

Mr. Densmore nodded.

"Not more than five," he said warningly.

"Remember what you promised Rothschild's people."

Mr. Harding nodded and crossed his knees. He lit a cigar from the box which Mr. Bundercombe passed round.

"This sounds interesting," the latter remarked. "I dare say Mr. Walmsley, too, has a little spare money for investment."

Mr. Densmore sighed, although his eyes were brightening.

"It's too good a thing," he explained confidentially, "to let the world into. Between ourselves, there's a fortune in it, and we want to keep it amongst our friends."

He drew a dummy prospectus from his pocket and began the recital of some figures in which I was not particularly interested. Mr. Bundercombe, however, appeared to be greatly impressed. Presently he rang the bell for another bottle of champagne.

"Gentlemen," he said, as he raised his glass to his lips, "there's just one little thing. American business methods and English are different in one respect. In my country we've got a sort of official guide which tells us exactly with whom we are dealing, and what their means are. Now I know you are good fellows, and it seems to me I'll be glad to go into this little affair with you. But we are

strangers financially, aren't we? Now if you were Americans, I should say to you, 'What's your rating?' and you'd tell me, because you'd know that I could look it up in Brad's guide in ten minutes."

"Perfectly sound," Mr. Harding admitted, "perfectly. Neither my partner nor I have anything to conceal. Last Christmas we were worth just over sixty thousand pounds, and since then we've made a bit."

"You've no other partner?" Mr. Bundercombe inquired.

"Certainly not," Mr. Harding replied.

"Then what about our friend, Stanley?" Mr. Bundercombe asked quietly.

Almost as he spoke Stanley walked into the midst of the little group. I have never in the whole course of my life seen two men so thoroughly and entirely amazed. Mr. Harding dropped his cigar on the carpet, where he let it remain. Mr. Densmore's hand shook so that the wine fell over on to his trousers. They stared at Stanley as though they were looking upon a ghost. Both men seemed somehow to have lost their confident bearing, seemed to have shrunken into smaller, less assertive, meaner beings.

"Sixty thousand pounds," Mr. Bundercombe went on, "one-third of which belongs to Stanley here."

"Absurd—positively absurd!" Harding faltered.

"Nothing—nothing of the sort," Densmore declared.

Mr. Bundercombe very carefully lit another cigar. Then he rang the bell. Harding rose to his feet. He was not looking in the least like the sleek, opulent gentleman who had entered the room a few minutes before.

"What's that for?" he demanded, pointing to the bell.

The door was already opened. Mr. Bundercombe indicated the young lady who stood upon the threshold, the lady with whom he had been lunching that day at Prince's.

"I only wished to have the pleasure," Mr. Bundercombe explained, "of presenting you two gentlemen, Mr. Harding especially, to this young lady."

"Blanche!" Mr. Harding exclaimed.

"D——n!" Mr. Densmore muttered.

Mr. Bundercombe moved towards the door.

"My dear Miss Blanche," he said, holding it open, "I will not ask you to stay, as our interview is scarcely, perhaps, a pleasant one. I simply wished you to show yourself so that Mr. Harding and his friend might understand how useless certain denials on their part would be. My ser-

vant will now place you in a taxi, and if you will do me the honour of calling here at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, I think I can promise you a satisfactory termination to this little affair."

The girl patted him on the shoulder.

" That's all right, Bundy," she declared. " I hope you'll take me out to lunch again. And as for him," she added, her eyebrows coming together, and pointing with outstretched hand towards Harding, " perhaps he'll understand now how well it pays to be a liar ! "

She turned round and left the room amidst a stricken silence. Mr. Bundercombe came back to his place.

" Gentlemen," he said, " I will be brief with you. It has given me the utmost pleasure to arrange this little meeting on behalf of my friend, Mr. Stanley. In the room on the other side of the passage is waiting my lawyer, who will draw up a renewal of your partnership deed with Mr. Stanley upon terms which we can discuss amicably. In the room behind this is waiting a particular friend of mine, Mr. Cullen, a detective. Remember," Mr. Bundercombe added, his voice suddenly stern and threatening, " that through all the years that man, your rightful partner, has lain in prison, through all the agony of his trial, the humiliation of his sentence, the name of neither

of you has passed his lips. Is it your wish that the truth shall now be told ? "

They shrank back. Harding was pale to the lips. Densmore was shivering.

" Very well," Mr. Bundercombe said, " if I send for the lawyer, Mr. Cullen can go. If you choose Mr. Cullen, the lawyer can go."

Harding moistened his lips with his tongue.

" We will make an arrangement," he said. " We have been wrong. Now that I see you here, Stanley," he continued, looking up with the first show of courage which either of them had exhibited, " I am ashamed ! It was a dirty trick. Forget it. After you were lagged, we decided to turn over a new leaf and be honest. We've been honest—inside the law at any rate—and we've made money. Come and take your share of it and forgive."

" We were brutes ! " Densmore muttered, bursting into tears.

They were both bending over Stanley.

Somehow, his hands stole out to them. Mr. Bundercombe and I strolled outside.

" You might tell Mr. Cullen that we shall not require him this evening," Mr. Bundercombe instructed the butler. " Bring another bottle of champagne and tell the gentleman from Wymans and Wymans and his clerk that we shall be ready for them in ten minutes."

CHAPTER XI

MR. BUNDERCOMBE'S WINK

I SCARCELY recognized Mr. Cullen when he first accosted me in the courtyard of the Milan. At no time of distinguished appearance, a certain carelessness of dress and gait had brought him now almost on a level with the loafer in the street. His clothes needed brushing, he was unshaven, and he looked much in need of a bath and a new outfit.

"Can I have a word with you, Mr. Walmsley?" he asked, standing in front of me and blocking my way towards the Strand.

I hesitated for a moment; his identity was only just then beginning to dawn upon me.

"Mr. Cullen!" I exclaimed.

"At your service, sir."

I turned round and led the way back into the court.

"This is not a professional visit, I trust?" I said as we passed into the smoke-room.

"Not entirely, sir," Mr. Cullen admitted. "At the same time——"

He paused and looked out of the window steadily for a moment.

"I trust," I began hastily, "that Mr. Bundercombe has not——"

"Precisely about him, sir, that I came to see you," Mr. Cullen interrupted. "I am bound to admit that a few weeks ago there was no man in the world I would have laid hands upon so readily. That day at the Ritz, however, changed my views completely. I feel," he added with a dry smile, "that I got more than level with Mr. Bundercombe when I sent for his wife."

"So it was you who sent the cables which brought her over," I remarked.

"But please remember, sir," he begged apologetically, "that I had never seen the lady. I sent the cables confidently anticipating that she would disclaim all knowledge of Mr. Bundercombe. When she arrived, and I realized that she was actually his wife, I forgave him freely for all the small annoyances he had caused me. My visit to you this morning, in fact, is entirely in his interests."

"What has Mr. Bundercombe been up to now?" I asked nervously.

"Nothing serious—at any rate, that I know of," Mr. Cullen assured me. "For the last fortnight—ever since Mrs. Bundercombe's arrival, in fact—Mr. Bundercombe has, somehow or other, managed to keep away from all his old

associates, and out of any sort of mischief. Last night, however, I was out on duty—I haven't had time to go home and change my clothes yet—in a pretty bad part, shadowing one of the most dangerous swell mobsmen in Europe, a man you may have heard of, sir. He is commonly known as Dagger Rodwell."

I hastily disclaimed any acquaintance with the person in question.

"Tell me, though," I begged, "what this has to do with Mr. Bundercombe?"

"Just this," Mr. Cullen explained. "I ran my man to ground in a place where I wouldn't be seen except professionally—and with him was Mr. Bundercombe."

"They were not engaged," I asked quickly, "in any law-breaking escapade at the time, I trust?"

Mr. Cullen shook his head reassuringly.

"Rodwell only goes in for the very big coups," he said. "Two or three in a life-time, if he brought them off, would be enough for him. All the same, there's something planning now, and he's fairly got hold of Mr. Bundercombe. He's a smooth-tongued rascal, absolutely a gentleman to look at and speak to. What I want you to do, sir, if you're sufficiently interested, is to take Mr. Bundercombe right away for a time."

"Interested!" I groaned. "He'll be my father-in-law in a couple of months' time."

"Then if you want him to attend the ceremony, sir," Mr. Cullen advised earnestly, "you get him out of London. He's restless. You may have noticed that yourself. He's spoiling for an adventure, and Dagger Rodwell is just the man to make use of him and then leave him high and dry, the booby for us to save our bacon with. I don't wish any harm to Mr. Bundercombe, sir, and that's straight. Until the day I met Mrs. Bundercombe at Liverpool, I am free to confess that I was feeling sore against him. To-day that's all wiped out. We had a pleasant little time at the Ritz that afternoon, and my opinion of the gentleman is that he's the right sort. I'm here to give you the advice, sir, to get him away from London, and get him away quick. I may know a trifle more than I've told you, or I may not, but you'll take my advice if you want to escape trouble."

"I'll do what I can," I assured him a little blankly. "To tell you the truth, I have been fearing something of this sort. During the last few days especially, his daughter tells me that he has been making all sorts of excuses to get away. I'll do what I can, and many thanks, Mr. Cullen. Let me offer you something."

Mr. Cullen declined anything except a cigar, and went on his way. I called a taxi and drove round to the very delightful house which the Bundercombes had taken in Prince's Gardens. I caught Mr. Bundercombe upon the threshold. He would have hurried off, but I laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Come back with me, if you please," I begged. "I have some news. I need to consult you all."

Mr. Bundercombe glanced at his watch. His manner was a little furtive. He was dressed not as usual in frock coat, white waistcoat, and silk hat, but in a blue serge double-breasted suit, a bowler hat, and a style of neck-gear a little reminiscent of the Bowery. Something in his very appearance seemed to me confirmatory of Mr. Cullen's warning. He looked at his watch and muttered something about an appointment.

"I shan't keep you for more than a few minutes," I promised. "Come along."

I kept my arm within his and led him back into the house.

"Eve is in the morning-room," he whispered. "Let's go in quietly, and perhaps we shan't be heard."

We crossed the hall on tiptoe in the manner of conspirators. Before we could enter the room, however, our progress was arrested by a somewhat

metallic cough. Mrs. Bundercombe, in a grey tweed coat and skirt of homely design, a black hat and black gloves, with a satchel in her hand, from which were protruding various forms of pamphlet literature, appeared suddenly on the threshold of the room which she had insisted upon having allotted for her private use, and which she was pleased to call her study.

"Mr. Bundercombe!" she exclaimed portentously, taking no notice whatever of me.

"My dear?" he replied.

"May I ask the meaning of your leaving the house like a truant schoolboy at this hour in the morning, and in such a garb?" she demanded, eyeing him severely through her pince-nez. "Is your memory failing you, Joseph Henry? Did you, or did you not, arrange to accompany me to the offices of the Women's Social Federation?"

"I fear I—er—I had forgotten the matter," Mr. Bundercombe stammered. "An affair of business. I was rung up on the telephone."

Mrs. Bundercombe stared at him. She said nothing—her expression was sufficient. She turned to me.

"Eve is in the morning-room, Mr. Walmsley," she said. "I presume that your visit at this hour of the morning was intended for her?"

"Precisely," I admitted. "I will go in and see her."

I opened the door, and Mr. Bundercombe rather precipitately preceded me. If he had contemplated escape, however, he was doomed to disappointment. Mrs. Bundercombe followed us in. She reminded us of her presence by a hard cough as Eve saluted me in a light-hearted fashion.

"Mind, there's Mother!" Eve whispered, with a little grimace. "Tell me why you have come so early, Paul? Are you going to take me out motoring all day? Or are you coming to the dressmaker's with me? I really ought to have a chaperon of some sort, you know, and Mother is much too busy making friends with the leaders of the Cause over here."

She made a face at me from behind a vase of flowers. Mrs. Bundercombe apparently thought it well to explain her position.

"I find it," she said, "absolutely incumbent upon me, while on a visit to this metropolis, to cultivate the acquaintance of the women of this country who are in sympathy with the great movement in the States with which I am associated. It is expected of me that I should make my presence over here known."

"Naturally," I agreed, "naturally, Mrs.

Bundercombe. I see by the paper that you were speaking at a meeting last night. That reminds me," I went on, "that I really did come down this morning on rather an important matter, and perhaps it is as well that you are all here, as I should like your advice. I have received an invitation to stand for the division of the county in which I live."

They all looked puzzled.

"To stand for Parliament, I mean," I hastily explained. "It seems really rather a good opportunity, as, of course, I am fairly well known in the district, and the majority against us was only seventy or eighty last election."

"Say, that's interesting!" Mr. Bundercombe declared, setting down his hat. "I didn't know you were by way of being a professional man, though."

"I'm not," I replied. "You wouldn't call politics a profession exactly."

Mr. Bundercombe was more puzzled than ever. His hand caressed his chin.

"Well, it's one way of making a living, isn't it?" he asked. "We call it a profession on our side."

"It isn't a way of making a living at all," I assured him. "It costs one a great deal more than can be made out of it."

Mr. Bundercombe stopped scratching his chin. Mrs. Bundercombe sat down opposite me, and I was perfectly certain that she would presently have a few remarks to offer. Eve was looking delightfully interested.

"Say, I'm not quite sure that I follow you," Mr. Bundercombe observed. "I am with you all right when you say that the direct pecuniary payment for being in Parliament don't amount to anything, but what's your pull worth, eh?"

"My what?"

"Dash it all!" Mr. Bundercombe continued a little testily. "I only want to get at the common sense of the matter. You are thinking of trying for a seat in Parliament and you say the four hundred a year you get for it is nothing. Well, of course, it's nothing. What I want to know is just what you get out of it indirectly? You get the handling of so many appointments, I suppose? What are they worth to you each, and how many are there?"

I spent the next five minutes in an eloquent attempt to explain the difference between English and American politics. When I had said all there was to be said Mr. Bundercombe was partly convinced, but more than ever sure that he had found his way into a country of half-

witted people. Eve, however, was much quicker at grasping the situation.

"I think it's perfectly delightful, Paul," she declared. "I have read no end of stories of English electioneering, and they sound such fun. I want to come down and help. I have tons of new dresses, and I can read up all about politics going down in the train."

"That brings me," I went on, "to the real object of my visit. I want you and your father —I want you all," I added heroically, "to come down with me to Bedfordshire and help. You were coming, anyway, next week for a little time, you know. I want to carry you off at once."

Mrs. Bundercombe, who had been only waiting for her opportunity, broke in.

"Young man," she said impressively. "Mr. Walmsley, before I consent to attend one of your meetings, or to associate myself in any way with your cause, I must ask you one plain and simple question, and insist on a plain and simple answer. What are your views as to Woman's Suffrage?"

"The views of my party," I answered with futile diplomacy.

"Enunciate, briefly as possible, but clearly, what the views of your party are," Mrs. Bundercombe bade me.

"I won't have him heckled," Eve protested, coming over to my side.

I coughed.

"We are entirely in sympathy," I explained, "with the enfranchisement of women up to a certain point. We think that unmarried women who own property and pay taxes should have the vote."

"Balderdash!" Mrs. Bundercombe exclaimed firmly. "We want universal suffrage. We want men and women to be placed on exactly the same footing, politically and socially."

"That," I said, "I am afraid, no political party would be at present prepared to grant."

"Then, save as an opponent, I can attend no political meetings in this country," Mrs. Bundercombe declared, rising to her feet with a fearsome air of finality.

I sighed.

"In that case," I confessed, "I am afraid that it is useless for me to appeal to you for help. Perhaps you and your father——" I added, turning to Eve.

"Let them go down to you in the country by all means," Mrs. Bundercombe interrupted. "For my part, although my visit to Europe was wholly undesired—was forced upon me, in fact, by dire circumstances," she added emphatically,

glaring at Mr. Bundercombe, "since I am here I find so much work ready to my hand, so much appalling ignorance, so much amazing prejudice, that I conceive it to be my duty to take up during my stay the work which presents itself here. I accordingly shall not leave London."

Mr. Bundercombe cheered up a little.

"I am rather busy myself," he said, "but perhaps a day or two——"

I thrust my arm through his.

"I rely upon you to help me canvass," I told him. "A lot is done by personal persuasion."

"Canvass?" Mr. Bundercombe repeated reflectively. "Say, just what do you mean by that?"

"It is very simple," I assured him. "You go and talk to the farmers and voters generally and put a few plain issues before them. We'll post you up all right as to what to say. Then you wind up by asking for their vote and interest on my behalf."

"I do that, do I?" Mr. Bundercombe murmured. "Talk to them in a plain straightforward way, eh?"

"That's it," I agreed. "A man with sound common sense like you could do me a lot of good."

Mr. Bundercombe was thoughtful. I am convinced that at that moment the germs of certain

ideas, which bore fruit a little later on, were born in his mind. I saw him blink several times as he gazed up at the ceiling. I saw a faint smile gradually expand upon his face. A premonition of trouble, even at that moment, forced itself upon me.

"You have to be careful, you know," I explained a little apprehensively. "You have to keep friends with the fellows all the time. They wouldn't appreciate practical jokes down there, and the law as to bribery and corruption is very strict."

Mr. Bundercombe nodded solemnly.

"If I take the job on," he said, "you can trust me. It seems as though there might be something in it."

"You'll come down with me, then," I begged, "both of you? Come this afternoon. The dressmaker can follow you, Eve. It isn't far —an hour in the train and twenty minutes in the motor. I'll wire home. We may have to picnic a little just to start with, but I know that the most important of the servants are there, ready and waiting."

"Pray do not let me stand in your way," Mrs. Bundercombe declared, rising. "My time will be fully occupied. I wish you good morning, Mr. Walmsley. I have an appointment at a

quarter to twelve. You can let me know your final decision at luncheon time."

She left the room. Mr. Bundercombe, Eve, and I exchanged glances.

"How far away did you say your place was, Paul?" Mr. Bundercombe asked.

"Right in the country," I told him. "Takes you an hour and a half to get there."

"I think we'll come," Mr. Bundercombe decided, looking absently out of the window, and watching his wife eloquently admonish a taxicab driver who had driven up with a cigarette in his mouth. "Yes, I'm all for it."

My little party at Walmsley Hall was, in most respects, a complete success. My sister was able to come and play hostess, and Eve was charmed with my house and its surroundings. Mr. Bundercombe, however, was a source of some little anxiety. On the first morning, when we were all preparing to go out, he drew me on one side.

"Paul," he said—he had with some difficulty got into the way of calling me by my Christian name occasionally—"I want to cotton on to this thing. Where does your political boss hang out?"

I shook my head.

"We haven't such a person," I told him.

He seemed troubled. The more he inquired into our electioneering habits the less he seemed to understand about them.

"What's your platform, anyway?" he asked.

I handed him a copy of my election address, which he read carefully through with a large cigar in the corner of his mouth. He handed it back to me with a somewhat depressed air.

"Seems to kind of lack grit," he remarked, a little doubtfully. "Why don't you go for the other side a bit more?"

"Look here," I suggested, mindful that Eve was waiting for me, "you run down and have a chat with my agent. You'll find him just opposite the Town Hall in Bildborough. There's a car going down now."

"I'm on," he agreed. "Anyway, I must get to understand this business."

He departed presently and returned to luncheon with a distinctly crestfallen air. He beckoned me mysteriously on one side into the library.

"Look here, Paul," he said, "is it too late to change your ticket?"

"Change my what?" I asked him.

"Change your platform, or whatever you call it. You're on a wrong horse, Paul, my boy. Even your own agent admits it, although I

never mentioned your name at first or told him who I was. All the people round here with votes are farmers, agricultural labourers, and small shopkeepers. Your platform's no use to them."

"Well, that's what we've got to find out," I protested. "Personally, I am convinced that it is."

"Now, look here," Mr. Bundercombe argued, "these chaps, though they seem stupid enough, are out for themselves. They want to vote for what's going to make life easier for them. What's the good of sticking it into 'em about the Empire? Between you and me, I don't think they care a fig for it. Then all this talk about military service. Gee! They ain't big enough for it. Disestablishment, too—what do they care about that? You let me write your address for you. Promise 'em a Land Bill. Promise them their food on their table at a bit less. Stick something in about a reduction in the price of beer. I've seen the other chap's address, and it's a corker. Mostly lies, but thundering good ones. You let me touch yours up a bit."

"Where have you been?" I asked, a strange misgiving stealing into my mind. "Have you been talking to Mr. Ansell like this?"

"Ansell? No! Who's he?" Mr. Bundercombe inquired.

"My agent."

Mr. Bundercombe shook his head.

"Chap I pulled up with was called Harrison."

I groaned.

"You've been to the other fellow's agent," I told him, "the agent for the Radical candidate."

Mr. Bundercombe whistled.

"You don't say!" he murmured. "Well, I tell you what it is, Paul, there are no flies on that chap. He's a real nippy little worker—that's what he is. If you take my advice," he went on persuasively, "you'll swop. We'll make it worth his while to come over. I've seen your Mr. Ansell—if that's his name. I saw the name on a brass plate, and I saw him come out. Stiff, starched sort of chap, with grey side-whiskers."

"That's the man," I admitted. "He, and his father before him, and his grandfather, have been solicitors to my people for I don't know how many years."

"He looked it," Mr. Bundercombe declared. "A withered old skunk, if ever there was one. You want a live man to see you through this, Paul. You let me go down and sound Harrison this afternoon. No reason that I can see why we shouldn't use his fellow's address too, if we can make terms with him."

I poured Mr. Bundercombe out a glass of sherry.

"Look here," I said, "politics over on this side

don't admit of such violent changes. My address is in the printers' hands, and I've got to stick to it; and Ansell will have to be my agent whatever happens. It isn't all talk that wins these elections. The Walmsleys are well known in the county, and we've done a bit for the country during the last hundred years. This other fellow—Horrocks, his name is—has never been near the place before. I grant you he's going to promise a lot of very interesting things, but that's been going on just a little too long. The people have had some. I think you'll find they'll put more trust in the little we can promise than in that rigmarole of Harrison's."

Mr. Bundercombe shook his head doubtfully.

"Well," he sighed, "I'm only on the outside edge of this thing yet. I must give it another morning."

We had a pleasant luncheon party, at which Mr. Bundercombe was introduced to some of my supporters, with whom he soon made himself popular. Eve and I then made our first little effort at canvassing. Eve's methods differed from her father's.

"I am so sorry," she said, as she shook hands with a very influential but very doubtful voter of the farmer class, "but I don't know anything about English politics, so I can't talk to you about

them as I'd like to. But you know I'm going to marry Mr. Walmsley, and come and live here, and it would be so nice to feel that all my friends had voted for him and helped him to get into Parliament. If you had a few minutes to spare, Mr. Brown, would you please tell me just where you don't agree with Paul? I should so much like to hear, because he tells me that if once you were on his side he should feel almost comfortable."

Mr. Brown, who had always met my advances with a grim taciturnity which made conversation exceedingly difficult, proceeded to dissert upon one or two of the vexed questions of the day. I ventured to put in a few words now and then, and after a time he invited us in to tea. When we left he was more gracious than I had ever known him.

"And you must vote for Mr. Walmsley," Eve declared, at the end of her little speech of thanks, "because I want so much to have you come and take tea with me on the Terrace at the House of Commons, and I can't unless Paul is a member, can I?"

"Bribery and corruption," Mr. Brown laughed. "However, we'll see. Certainly I have been very pleased to hear Mr. Walmsley's views upon several matters. When did you say the village meeting was, Mr. Walmsley?"

" Thursday night," I replied.

" Well, I'll come," he promised.

" You'll take the chair ? " I begged. " Nothing could do me more good than that, and I feel sure that if you look at things——"

I was going to be very eloquent, but Eve interrupted me.

" Let me sit next you, please," she said, looking up at him with her large, unusually innocent eyes.

" Oh, well, if you like," Mr. Brown assented, " if you like."

We drove off down the avenue in complete silence. When we had turned the corner Eve gave a little sigh.

" Paul," she declared, " I don't think there's anything I've ever come across in my life half as much fun as electioneering. Please take me to the next most difficult."

If Eve was a success, however, Mr. Bundercombe was to turn out a great disappointment. He came home a little late for dinner, looking very gloomy.

" Paul," he said, as we met for a moment in the smoking-room, where I discovered him making himself a concoction of gin and vermouth, " Paul, I've sad news for you."

" I'm sorry to hear it," I replied.

" I've looked into this little matter of politics," he continued, holding up his wineglass by the stem and swallowing its contents. " I've looked into it as thoroughly as I can, and I can't support you. You're on the wrong side, my boy. I've shaken hands with Mr. Horrocks, and that's the man who'll get the votes in this constituency. I've promised to do what I can to help him."

I was a little taken aback.

" You're not in earnest ! " I exclaimed.

" Dead-gone earnest," Mr. Bundercombe regretted. " The chap's convinced me. I feel it's up to me to lend him a hand."

" But surely," I expostulated, " even if you cannot see your way clear to help me, there's no need for you to go over to the enemy like this. You're not obliged to interfere in the election at all, are you ? "

Mr. Bundercombe sighed. He helped himself to more gin and vermouth and surveyed the contents of the glass before swallowing it.

" Matter of principle with me," he explained. " I must be doing something. I can't canvass for you. I'll have a look around a bit for the other chap."

I was just a little annoyed.

" I really don't see," I began, " why you should feel called upon to interfere in an English election at all, unless it is to help a friend."

Mr. Bundercombe looked at his empty glass and set it down. Then he looked steadily at me and solemnly winked.

"Say, that's the dinner gong!" he announced cheerfully. "Let's be getting in."

"But I don't quite understand——"

Mr. Bundercombe repeated the wink upon a smaller scale. I followed him into the dining-room, still in the dark as to his exact political position.

The movements of my prospective father-in-law were for the next few days wrapped in a certain mystery. He arrived home one evening, however, in a state of extreme indignation. As usual, when anything had happened to upset him, he came to look for me in the library before dinner, and found solace in the little row of bottles upon the sideboard.

"My boy," he said, "of all the God-forsaken, out-of-the-world, benighted holes, this Bildborough of yours absolutely takes the cake! For sheer ignorance—for sheer, thick-headed, bumptious, arrogant ignorance, give me your farmers."

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Wrong? Listen!" he exclaimed, almost dramatically. "In this district—in this whole district, mind—there is not a single farmer who has heard of Bundercombe's Reapers."

" I farm a bit myself," I reminded him, " and I had never heard of them."

Mr. Bundercombe returned promptly to the sideboard and mixed himself a cocktail.

" Bundercombe's Reapers," he said, as soon as he had disposed of it, " are the only reapers used by live farmers in the United States of America, Australia, or any other country worth a darned cent."

" That seems to hit us pretty hard," I remarked. " Have you got an agent over here ? "

" Sure ! " Mr. Bundercombe replied. " I don't follow the sales now, so I can't tell what he's doing, but we've an agent here, and any country that doesn't buy Bundercombe's Reapers is off the line as regards agriculture."

" What are you going to do about it ? " I asked.

" Do ? " Mr. Bundercombe toyed with his wineglass for a moment and then set it down.

" What I have done," he announced, " is this. I have wired to my agent, I have ordered him to ship half a dozen machines, if necessary on a special train, and I am going to give an exhibition on some land I have hired, over by Little Bildborough, the day after to-morrow."

" That's the day of the election ! " I exclaimed.

" You couldn't put it off, I suppose ? " he suggested. " That's the day I've fixed for my

exhibition, at any rate. I'm giving the farmers a free lunch—slap-up affair it's going to be, I can tell you."

"I am afraid," I answered, with wholly wasted sarcasm, "that the affair has gone too far now for us to consider an alteration in the date."

"Well, well, we must try not to clash," Mr. Bundercombe said magnanimously. "How long does the voting go on?"

"From eight till eight," I told him.

Mr. Bundercombe was thoughtful.

"It's a long time to hold them," he murmured.

"To hold whom?" I demanded.

Mr. Bundercombe started slightly.

"Nothing! Nothing! By the by, do you know a chap called Jonas—Henry Jonas, of Milton Farm?"

"I should think I do," I groaned. "He's the backbone of the opposition, the best speaker they've got, and the most popular man."

Mr. Bundercombe smiled sweetly.

"Is that so?" he observed. "Well, well. He is a very intelligent man. I trust I'll be able to persuade him that any reaper he may be using at the present moment is a jay compared with Bundercombe's this season model."

"I trust you may," I answered, a trifle tartly. "I'm glad you're likely to do a little business, but

you won't mind my reminding you, will you, that you really came down here to give me a leg up with my election, and not to sell your reaping machines, or to spend half your time in the enemy's camp."

Mr. Bundercombe smiled. It was a curious smile, which seemed somehow to lose itself in his face. Then the dinner gong went, and he winked at me slowly. Again I was conscious of some slight uneasiness. It began to dawn upon me that there was a scheme somewhere hatching ; that Mr. Bundercombe's activity in the camp of the enemy might perhaps have an unsuspected significance. I talked to Eve about this after dinner. But she succeeded in reassuring me.

"Father talks of nothing but his reaping machines," she declared. "Besides, I am quite sure that he would do nothing indiscreet. Only yesterday I found him studying a copy of the Act referring to bribery and corruption. Dad's pretty smart, you know."

"I do know that," I admitted. "I wish I knew what he is up to, though."

The next day was the last before the election. The little market town of Bildborough was in a state of considerable excitement. Several open-air meetings were held towards evening. Eve and I, returning from a motor tour of the

constituency, called at the office of my agent. We chatted with Mr. Ansell for a little time, and then he pointed across the square.

"There's an American there," he said, "whom the other side seem to have got hold of. He's their most popular speaker by a long way, but I gather they're a little uneasy about him. Didn't I have the pleasure of meeting him at your house?"

"Mr. Bundercombe," I sighed. "He came down here to help me."

Mr. Ansell put on his hat and beckoned to me mysteriously.

"Come out by the back way," he invited. "We shall hear him. He is going to speak from the little platform there."

By crossing a hotel yard, a fragment of kitchen garden, and a bowling green, we were able to come within a few yards of where Mr. Bundercombe, with several other of Mr. Horrocks's supporters, was standing upon a small raised platform. Two local tradesmen and one helper from London addressed a few remarks of the usual sort to an apathetic audience which was rapidly increasing in size. It was only when Mr. Bundercombe rose to his feet that the slightest sign of enthusiasm manifested itself. Eve looked at me with a pleased smile.

"Just look at all of them," she whispered. "How they are hurrying to hear Dad speak."

"That's all very well," I grumbled, "but he ought to be doing this for me."

Her fingers pressed my arm.

"Listen!" she said.

Mr. Bundercombe's style was breezy, and his jokes were frequent. He stood in an easy attitude and spoke with remarkable fluency. His first few remarks, which were mainly humorous, were cheered to the echo. The crowd was increasing all the time. Presently he took them into his confidence.

"When I came down here a few days ago," we heard him say, "I came down meaning to support my friend Mr. Walmsley." (Groans and cheers.) "That's all right, boys," Mr. Bundercombe continued. "There's nothing the matter with Mr. Walmsley, but I come from a country where there's a bit more kick about politics, and I pretty soon made up my mind that the kick wasn't on the side which my young friend Mr. Walmsley belongs to. Now just listen to this. As one business man to another, I tell you that I asked Mr. Walmsley, the first night I was here: 'What are you getting out of this? Why are you going into Parliament?' He didn't seem to understand. He pleaded guilty to a four hundred a

year fee but told me at the same time that it cost him a great deal more than that in extra charities. I asked him what pull he got through being in Parliament, how many of his friends he could find places for. All he could do was to smile and tell me that I didn't understand the way things were done in this country. He wanted to make me believe that he was anxious to sit in Parliament there, and work day after day just for the honour and glory of it, or because he thought it was his duty. You know I'm an American business man, and that didn't cut no ice with me, so I dropped in and had a chat with Mr. Horrocks. I soon came to the conclusion that the candidate I'm here to support to-night is the man who comes a bit nearer to our idea of politics over on the other side of the pond. Mr. Horrocks doesn't make any bones about it. He wants that four hundred a year—in fact, he needs it. (Ironical cheers.) He wants to call himself M.P., because when he goes out to lecture on Socialism he'll get a ten guinea fee instead of five, on account of these two letters after his name. Furthermore, his is the party which understands what I call practical politics. Every job that's going is given to their friends, and if there aren't enough jobs to go round, why, they get one of their statesmen to frame a Bill—what you call

your Insurance Bill is one of them, I believe—in which there are several hundred offices that need filling, and there you are."

Mr. Ansell and I exchanged glances. The enthusiasm which had greeted Mr. Bundercombe's efforts was giving place now to murmurs and more ironical cheers. One of his coadjutors upon the platform leaned over and whispered in Mr. Bundercombe's ear. Mr. Bundercombe nodded.

"Gentlemen," he concluded, "I'm told that my time is up. I have explained my views to you and told you why I think you ought to vote for Mr. Horrocks. I've nothing to say against the other fellow except that I don't understand his point of view. Mr. Horrocks I do understand. He's out to do himself a bit o' good, and it's up to you to help him."

A determined tug at Mr. Bundercombe's coat-tails by one of the men on the platform brought him to his seat amidst loud bursts of laughter and more cheers. Eve gripped my arm, and we turned slowly away.

"It's a privilege," I declared solemnly, "to have ever known your father. If only I had an idea what he meant about those reaping machines. You couldn't give me a hint, I suppose, Eve?"

She shook her head.

"Better wait."

In the excitement of that final day I think that both Eve and I completely forgot all about Mr. Bundercombe. It was not until we were on our way back from a motor tour through the outlying parts of the district, that we were forcibly reminded of his existence. Quite close to Little Bildborough, the only absolutely hostile part of my constituency, we came upon what was really an extraordinary sight. Our chauffeur, of his own accord, drew up by the side of the road. Eve and I rose in our places. In a large field upon our left were gathered together apparently the whole population of the district. In one corner was a huge marquee, through the open flaps of which we could catch a glimpse of a sumptuously arranged cold collation. On a long table just outside, covered with a white cloth, was a vast array of bottles, and a man in a short linen jacket, who struck me as being suspiciously like Fritz, the waiter at one of Mr. Bundercombe's favourite haunts in London. Towards the centre of the field, seated upon a ridiculously inadequate seat on the top of a reaping machine, was Mr. Bundercombe. He had divested himself of coat and waistcoat, and he was hatless. The perspiration was streaming down his face as he gripped the steering-wheel. He was followed by a little crowd of children and sympathizing men, who

cheered him all the time. At a little distance away, on the other side of a red flag, Henry Jonas, the large farmer of the district, and the speaker on whom my opponent chiefly relied, was seated upon a similar machine in a similar state of undress. It was apparent, however, even to us, that Mr. Bundercombe's progress was at least twice as rapid as his opponent's.

"What on earth is it all about?" I exclaimed, absolutely bewildered.

Eve, who was standing by my side, clasped her hands round my arm.

"It seems to me," she murmured sweetly, "as if Dad were trying his reaping machine against someone else's."

I looked at her demure little smile and I looked at the field, in which I recognized very many of my staunchest opponents. Then I looked at the marquee. The table there must have been set for at least a hundred people. Suddenly I received a shock. Seated underneath the hedge, hatless and coatless, with his hair in picturesque disorder, was Mr. Jonas's cousin, also a violent opponent of my politics, a Nonconformist, and a local preacher. He had a huge tumbler by his side, which, seeing me, he raised to his lips.

"Good old Walmsley!" he shouted out. "No

politics to-day. Much too hot. Come in and see the reaping match."

He took a long drink, and I sat down in the car.

"You know," I said to Mr. Ansell, who was standing on the front, "there'll be trouble about this."

Mr. Ansell was looking a little grave himself.

"Is Mr. Bundercombe really the manufacturer of that machine?" he asked.

"Of course he is," Eve replied. "It's the one hobby of his life—or rather, it used to be," she corrected herself hastily. "Even now, when he begins talking about his reaping machine he forgets everything."

Mr. Ansell hurried away and made a few inquiries. Meanwhile, we watched the progress of the match. Every time Mr. Bundercombe had to turn he rocked in his seat, and only retained his balance with difficulty. At every successful effort he was loudly cheered by a little group of following enthusiasts. Mr. Ansell returned looking a little more cheerful.

"Everything is being given by the Bundercombe Reaping Company," he announced, "and Mr. Bundercombe's city agent is on the spot prepared to book orders for the machine. It seems that Mr. Bundercombe has backed himself at ten to one in ten-pound notes to beat Mr. Jonas by half an hour, each taking half the field."

"Who's ahead?" Eve asked.

"Mr. Bundercombe is well ahead," Mr. Ansell replied, "and they say that he can do better still if he tries. It looks rather," Mr. Ansell concluded, dropping his voice, "as though he were trying to make the thing last out. Afterwards they are all going to sit down to a free meal—that is, if any of them are able to sit down," he added, with a glance around the field. "Hallo, here's Harrison."

Mr. Harrison, recognizing us, descended from his car and came across. He shook hands with Eve, at whom he glanced in somewhat peculiar fashion.

"Mr. Walmsley," he said, "a week ago we were rather proud of having inveigled away one of your adherents. All I can say at the present moment is that we should have been better satisfied if you had left Mr. Bundercombe in town."

"Why, he's spoken against me at nearly every one of your meetings," I protested.

"That's all very well," Mr. Harrison complained, "but he's not what I should call a convincing speaker. He is a democrat all right, and a people's man, and all the rest of it, but he hasn't got quite the right way of advocating our principles. I have been obliged to ask him to discontinue public speaking until after the election.

The fact of it is, I really believe that he's cost us a good many more votes than he's gained. All that he says is very well, but when he sits down one feels that our people are all for what they can get out of it, and yours are prepared to give their services for nothing."

"What's all this mean?" I asked, waving my hand towards the field.

Mr. Harrison looked at me very steadily. Then he looked at Eve. I can only hope that my expression was as guileless as Eve's.

"I told you about that hint that we were obliged to give Mr. Bundercombe," Mr. Harrison went on. "I suppose this is the result of it. He seems to have bewitched the whole of Little Bildborough. There's Jonas there, who was due to speak in four places to-day, will take no notice of anybody. I walked by the side of his machine, begging him to get down and come and keep his engagements, and he took no more notice of me than if I'd been a rabbit. There's his cousin, who has more hold upon the Nonconformists of the district than any man I know, sitting under a hedge drinking champagne out of a tumbler. There are at least a score of men with their eyes glued upon that tent, who ought to be hard at work in the district. I am beginning to doubt even whether they'll be in in time to vote."

"Well, we must be getting on, anyway," I said. "See you later, Mr. Harrison."

Mr. Harrison nodded a little gloomily as we glided off. Eve squeezed my hand.

"Isn't Dad a dear!" she murmured.

Eve congratulated me when late that night the result came in, and I found that by a majority of twenty-seven votes I had been elected member for the division.

"Aren't you glad now, Paul dear, that we brought Father to keep him out of mischief?" she whispered.

Mr. Bundercombe held out his hand.

"Paul," he said, "congratulate you, my boy. I was on the other side, but I can take a licking with the best of them. Congratulate you heartily."

He held out his hand and gripped mine. Once more he winked.

CHAPTER XII

"THE SHORN LAMB"

I NEVER remembered seeing Mr. Bundercombe look more cheerful than when, at his urgent summons, I left Eve in the drawing-room and made my way into the study. He was standing on the hearthrug, with the tails of his morning coat drooping over his arms, and an expression on his face which I can only describe as cherubic. Seated on chairs a yard or so away from him were two visitors, of whom at first glance I formed a most unfavourable opinion. One was a flashily dressed, middle-aged man, with fair moustache, puffy cheeks, and a superfluity of jewellery. The other I might at first have taken for an undertaker's mute. He had an exceedingly red nose, watery eyes, and was dressed in deep mourning.

"Paul," Mr. Bundercombe said, "let me introduce you to Captain Duncan Bannister and Mr. Cheape, his solicitor."

The two men rose and bowed in turn. I found it difficult to maintain a tolerant attitude, but I did my best.

"These two gentlemen," Mr. Bundercombe

continued cheerfully, "have come round to blackmail me."

"Sir!" Captain Bannister exclaimed with a great show of anger.

"Mr. Bundercombe!" the person called Mr. Cheape echoed.

They made rather a poor show of it, however. Mr. Bundercombe, wholly unperturbed by their righteous indignation, smiled still benignly upon them.

"Come, come," he expostulated, "this is a business interview. Why mince words?"

Captain Bannister rose to his feet. He turned towards me.

"Mr. Bundercombe," he explained, "either wilfully or otherwise, misinterprets the object of our coming. It is possible that his nationality may have something to do with it. I have always understood that the standard amongst Americans with regard to affairs of honour is scarcely so high as in this country."

"Mr. Bundercombe has a habit of taking a common-sense view of things," I remarked. "I cannot criticize his attitude because I am ignorant of the particulars. Since he has sent for me, however, I presume that I am to be informed."

"Quite so, quite so," Mr. Bundercombe

murmured. "You go ahead, Captain Bannister. You tell your story."

"My story," Captain Bannister said, "is told in a very few words. I made the acquaintance of Mr. Bundercombe in the smoking-room at the Milan some months ago. We met several times, and on one occasion I presented him to a friend of mine, the widow of a colonel in the Indian Army—Mrs. Delaporte."

At this stage, Mr. Bundercombe, who was quite irrepressible, winked at me slowly. I took no notice of him whatever.

"On the particular evening to which I refer," Captain Bannister continued, "it was suggested —by Mrs. Delaporte, I think—that we should go round to her rooms and play *chemin de fer*. There were five of us altogether—Mr. Bundercombe, Mrs. Delaporte, myself, a Mr. Dimsdale, and the Honourable Montague Pelham, a young gentleman of the best family. When we arrived at Mrs. Delaporte's rooms, however, it transpired that Mr. Bundercombe was wholly ignorant of *chemin de fer*, and the game was accordingly changed to poker. In the course of the game I was shocked to detect Mr. Bundercombe cheating. For Mrs. Delaporte's sake I conceived it best to try and hush up the matter entirely. I looked upon Mr. Bundercombe as a card-sharper of the

ordinary type, and I simply blamed myself for having introduced him to my friends. I accordingly made some excuse to terminate the party."

" Did anyone else except yourself," I inquired, " observe this alleged irregularity ? "

" Both Mrs. Delaporte and Mr. Dimsdale distinctly saw the very flagrant piece of cheating which first attracted my attention," Captain Bannister declared. " They understood at once the position when I suggested the termination of the game. Our party broke up hurriedly. Since that day I have not seen Mr. Bundercombe."

I turned towards my prospective father-in-law. Mr. Bundercombe for the first time was looking a little annoyed.

" Do you mean to tell me," he said, addressing Captain Bannister, " that both that young jay Dimsdale and Mrs. Delaporte saw me pass up that ace ? "

" Without a doubt," Captain Bannister assented, a little taken aback.

" Guess my fingers must be getting a bit clumsy," Mr. Bundercombe sighed. " Well, well, there the matter is."

" But, Mr. Bundercombe," I asked seriously, " what have you to say in reply to Captain Bannister's statement ? "

" Don't seem to me there's much to be said," Mr. Bundercombe replied.

" But he accuses you of cheating ! " I exclaimed.

" Oh, I cheated all right ! " Mr. Bundercombe admitted readily.

Captain Bannister turned towards me triumphantly.

" After that confession from Mr. Bundercombe before witnesses," he said, " I do not imagine that our case will require very much more proof."

I was completely nonplussed. Mr. Bundercombe's confession was so ready, his demeanour so unalterably good tempered. I went on to ask, however, what certainly seemed to me the most important question under the circumstances :

" If you were content, Captain Bannister," I inquired, " to let the matter drop a few months ago, why are you here now ? "

" Aha ! " Mr. Bundercombe exclaimed. " Put his finger on the crux of the whole affair straight off. Smart young fellow, my son-on-law that is to be. Now then, Captain Bannister and Mr. Cheape ! Speak up like men and let us know the truth. You let me walk out of that flat, Captain Bannister, and were jolly glad to see the back of me. Why this visit with a legal adviser, and both of you with faces as long as fiddles ? "

Captain Bannister ignored Mr. Bundercombe and addressed himself to me.

"Mr. Bundercombe," he said, "calling himself, by the by, Mr. Parker, as an American card-sharper was of no interest to us. We were simply ashamed and disgusted to think that we should have permitted such a person the entrée to our society. When we discovered, however, that instead of being a professional card-sharper," Captain Bannister continued with emphasis, "Mr. Bundercombe enjoys a recognized position in Society, and that he is reputed to be a man of great wealth, the affair assumes an altogether different complexion."

"Worth going for, ain't I?" Mr. Bundercombe chuckled.

"I feel sure, Mr. Walmsley," Captain Bannister continued, "that some portion of your sympathy, at any rate, as an English gentleman of social distinction will be with us in this matter. The affair which we were content to let drop against Mr. Parker the adventurer, we feel it our duty to pursue against Mr. Bundercombe the millionaire."

"We should save time," I remarked coldly, "if you were to put your demands into plain words. What is it that you want or expect from Mr. Bundercombe?"

"Not what you appear to think, sir," Captain

Bannister replied stiffly. " We require from Mr. Bundercombe a written confession of his misdemeanour, and his resignation from the Sidney Club."

" The what club ? " I asked dubiously.

" The Sidney Club," Captain Bannister repeated with dignity. " The club in question may not be very large, but it is quite well known, and I had the misfortune to act as Mr. Bundercombe's sponsor there."

I glanced towards my prospective father-in-law. He nodded.

" They put me up for some sort of a pothouse," he admitted, " and I handed over a tenner, I think it was, for my subscription. Rotten little hole somewhere near the Haymarket. I've never been there since. I joined so that they shouldn't stand me drinks without my being able to return the compliment. I'll resign with pleasure."

" And write a confession of your misdemeanour, sir ? " Captain Bannister persisted.

Mr. Bundercombe scratched his chin.

" I'll write an account of the whole affair," he remarked dryly.

Captain Bannister took up his hat.

" I regret," he decided, " that Mr. Bundercombe's attitude does not encourage a continua-

tion of this conversation. We will not detain you further, gentlemen."

Mr. Cheape also rose. They moved towards the door.

"Much obliged to you for calling," Mr. Bundercombe said hospitably. "Drop in and have a little game of cards with me, any afternoon you like. I am a bit out of practice, but I fancy I am still in your class."

Captain Bannister turned around suddenly. He replaced his hat upon the table and stood with folded arms.

"Sir," he announced, "I have changed my mind. You have insulted me. Five minutes ago I was prepared to treat you like a gentleman. I would have accepted your resignation from the Sidney Club and your written apology. Now I have changed my mind. You have slandered me, both by imputation and directly."

"How much?" Mr. Bundercombe asked cheerfully.

"Five thousand pounds," Captain Bannister answered firmly.

"How much more if I call you a lying, card-sharping swindler?" Mr. Bundercombe demanded with unabated good humour.

Captain Bannister looked dangerous, but he ignored the question.

"You have your terms, sir," he said. "Unless you are prepared to hand over the sum of five thousand pounds, my solicitor, Mr. Cheape here, will at once commence proceedings against you with reference to the affair in Mrs. Delaporte's flat. Remember, we have four witnesses to bring into court as to your having cheated, not including your son-in-law here, who heard your confession. For any countercharge which you might be disposed to make," Captain Bannister concluded meaningly, "you have not a single scrap of evidence."

"Got me on toast, haven't they, Paul?" Mr. Bundercombe observed cheerfully. "Five thousand pounds is a lot of money, Captain Bannister," he added. "I'll pay your taxi fare back to wherever you came from. That's my best offer."

Captain Bannister turned towards the door.

"Come along, Mr. Cheape," he said. "You know my address, sir. Talk this matter over with your—with Mr. Walmsley, if you please. If we hear nothing from you on Monday morning, a writ will be issued."

"Before Monday," Mr. Bundercombe declared, in a hollow voice, "my body will be found in the Thames. Kick 'em out, Walmsley, and look after the coats in the hall."

I infused a shade more civility into my leave-

taking than Mr. Bundercombe's words invited. As soon as the door was closed behind the two men, I returned to the study. Mr. Bundercombe was still standing upon the hearthrug, but the smile had faded from his lips. He looked at me a little anxiously.

"Rotten lot of thieves!" he remarked. "I told you they were here for blackmail."

"It's a beastly affair," I pointed out gloomily. "You see, they've nothing to lose, with a lawyer who's standing in with them, in taking the case into court, and you're just up for a couple of very good clubs. What did happen?"

"Simple as A B C," Mr. Bundercombe explained. "You see, these two fellows, Dimsdale and Pelham, really looked like mugs. I knew that Bannister was a wrong 'un from the first, and Mrs. Delaporte, of course, was in the thing. When they proposed a game of cards I chipped in, thinking to watch the fun and look after the jays. Sure enough, when we started playing, Dimsdale and Pelham were the losers. Then they began to get at me. Bannister palmed a king into his hand, and I palmed an ace. That seemed fair enough, eh?"

Mr. Bundercombe's expression, as he looked at me, was the expression of an appealing child. I bit my lip.

" A minute or two later I tumbled to the whole situation," he went on. " Dimsdale and Pelham weren't jays at all. It was a gang of four, and they raked me in for the mug. After I'd tumbled to that, I must confess that I took some interest in the game. If they'd given me another quarter of an hour I should have won every chip there was going. My boy," Mr. Bundercombe went on, a sudden grin transfiguring his expressive countenance, " it was worth a fortune to see their faces. I was a bit out of practice, but I guarantee I'd make a living with my fingers and a pack of cards anywhere yet, and defy detection. I had 'em all guessing before long, and Paul, you should have seen their faces when they tumbled to it ! I tell you they bundled me out in double quick time, and I laughed all the way home. Four sharks to pitch upon me as a victim ! "

He began to laugh again, but the sight of my grave face checked him. He at once assumed the appearance of a penitent.

" Where did you come across them again ? " I asked.

" I met Mrs. Delaporte the other day," he said, " down at Ranelagh. We chatted for a little time. I couldn't feel any ill-will against the woman ; I'd enjoyed my evening so thoroughly. Then some people stopped and talked to me, and

she found out who I was. Soon afterwards she began to make proposals of a semi-matrimonial nature. Perhaps I wasn't very tactful. Anyway, she seemed a little huffed when she left me, and here we are. Say, do you think those jossers can do anything ? "

" It rather depends," I replied, " upon their own reputations. You'd better let me make a few inquiries. I'll have to get off now ; Eve's waiting. I'll call round and see my solicitor later in the day."

" Shame to bother you," Mr. Bundercombe regretted. " So-long ! "

The affair which Mr. Bundercombe had treated with his customary light-heartedness seemed likely to develop most unpleasantly. Within forty-eight hours he was the recipient of a writ from the firm of solicitors with whom Mr. Cheape was connected, and although inquiries went to prove that Captain Bannister, Mrs. Delaporte, and their associates were certainly not people of the highest respectability, there was yet nothing definite against them. My solicitor, to whom I took Mr. Bundercombe, most regretfully advised him to settle out of court.

" The friends whom Mr. Bundercombe is now making, and may make in later life," the lawyer remarked, " will certainly not appreciate the

adventurous spirit which—er—induced him to make acquaintances amongst a certain class of people. Therefore, in the interests of my client Mr. Walmsley, as well as your own, Mr. Bundercombe," he concluded, " I am afraid that I must advise you, very much against my own inclinations, to settle this matter."

Mr. Bundercombe left the lawyer's office thoroughly depressed.

" It isn't the money," he declared gloomily. " It's the fact of being bested by this little gang of thieves that irritates me."

" I am sure," I told him, " that Mr. Wymans' advice is sound. If the case goes into court and comes up before the committee, even of a rotten club like the Sidney, I am afraid you would have to withdraw your membership from the other places, and you might find the affair continually cropping up and causing you annoyance."

Mr. Bundercombe heaved a mighty sigh.

" Well, we've got two days left," he said. " If nothing happens before I'll pay up."

Mr. Bundercombe rang me up on the morning of the last day appointed for his decision.

" We've got a conference on, Paul," he announced dejectedly. " Will you come round here for me at a quarter to eleven ? "

I assented, and arrived at the house in Prince's

Gardens a few minutes before that time. Eve met me in the hall.

"Please tell me, dear," she begged, as she drew me into the morning-room, "why Daddy is so low-spirited?"

"It isn't anything serious," I assured her. "It's just a little trouble arising out of one of his adventures. We shall get out of it all right."

"Poor Daddy!" she exclaimed. "I am sure he has had no sleep for two nights. I heard him walking up and down his room."

"Well, it will all be over to-day," I promised. "After all, it only means a little money."

"Daddy does so hate to get the worst of anything," she sighed, "and I am afraid, from the look of his face, that this time he has been had."

"I am afraid so, too," I agreed. "Never mind, we have done the best we can, and we are going to settle it up to-day. Perhaps he'll tell you all about it afterwards."

We heard a door slam and Mr. Bundercombe's voice.

"He is asking for you," Eve whispered. "Hurry along, and come back as soon as you've got this business over."

I found Mr. Bundercombe chastened, but in all other respects his usual self.

"We are calling for Mr. Wymans," he said, "in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and afterwards we are going round to Mrs. Delaporte's flat. We are going to meet Bannister there and his lawyer."

"Why do we concern ourselves in the matter at all?" I asked, as we drove off. "I don't see why we can't leave the lawyers to do this final settlement."

Mr. Bundercombe shook his head.

"You leave too much to lawyers in this country," he remarked. "We generally like to see the thing through ourselves over at home, even if we take a lawyer along. This is an unpleasant business, if you like, but it's no good shirking it, and I mean to make a fresh start with a clean slate."

We called for Mr. Wymans and drove on to Mrs. Delaporte's flat. We were at once admitted into an over-heated and over-perfumed room, and found Captain Bannister, Mrs. Delaporte and Mr. Cheape awaiting us. Their demeanour betokened a certain amount of anxiety. Mrs. Delaporte alone made a little conversation, and, the habits of a lifetime asserting themselves, made eyes at Mr. Bundercombe. Mr. Bundercombe, however, conducted himself very much like the deacon of a chapel in the presence of his minister. His natural good humour seemed to have departed.

His manners matched the unusual solemnity of his attire.

" Madam," he said, bowing to Mrs. Delaporte, " Mr. Cheape and Captain Bannister, I have suggested this conference because I believe in settling these affairs myself, and not leaving everything to lawyers ; no disrespect to present company. I have made an idiot of myself, and I am ready to pay—a certain amount."

Mr. Cheape rose to his feet. He was sitting in front of a writing-desk, with a sheet of paper in front of him, as though prepared to take notes of the proceedings.

" So that there be no possible misunderstanding," he intervened, " my clients will take not a penny less than the five thousand pounds mentioned."

" And I," Mr. Bundercombe declared, sadly but very firmly, " will give not a penny more than four thousand pounds."

Mr. Cheape shrugged his shoulders, as though to intimate that the conference was at an end. Captain Bannister made a few remarks to the effect that if he had not been a moderate man, and willing to conduct the affair in a gentlemanly manner, he should have asked for ten thousand. Mrs. Delaporte alluded to five thousand pounds as though the amount represented the outcome

of a day's shopping. It was astonishing how little they seemed to regard the value of money.

"Now," Mr. Bundercombe went on, "if I've brought you all together here on false pretences, I am sorry. There's nothing to be done in that case but to say good morning and meet in the law court. But," he added, striking the back of a chair with his clenched fist, and looking more like Napoleon than I had ever seen him, "I swear, by the word of Joseph H. Bundercombe, which has never yet been broken, that I will not hand over one cent more than four thousand pounds."

The protests were this time a little weaker. Mr. Bundercombe sat with folded arms, with his eyes fixed upon the ceiling and an air of being altogether disinterested in the proceedings, whilst the three who comprised the other party whispered together.

Presently Mr. Cheape rose to his feet.

"Mr. Wymans," he began, punctiliously addressing the lawyer first, "and Mr. Bundercombe, my clients are only too anxious to end this unhappy matter. They feel that their demands have been most moderate, but on my advice they have consented to accept a reduction of five hundred pounds."

Mr. Bundercombe rose heavily to his feet.

"Mr. Wymans," he said, "and Paul, come along. I do not bargain. I wish you all good morning."

He turned towards the door, and we followed him. It was already opened when we were called back. Captain Bannister and Mr. Cheape were whispering eagerly together. Mr. Cheape rose once more to his feet.

"In order to prove," he announced, "how entirely devoid my clients are of mercenary considerations, they agree, Mr. Bundercombe, to accept the sum of four thousand pounds."

Mr. Bundercombe set down his hat again. Then he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket.

"Condition number one, then," he observed, "is now agreed upon. We proceed to condition number two. Mrs. Delaporte, Captain Bannister and Mr. Cheape," he went on earnestly, "I have been guilty of an indiscretion, the proof of which is in your hands. Having decided to make London my home for a time, I desire once and for all to extinguish all possibility of this affair ever cropping up again in any shape or form."

Mr. Cheape rose to his feet.

"Sir," he said to Mr. Bundercombe, "my clients will give you their written undertaking that the affair shall be consigned to oblivion."

Mr. Bundercombe waved him down.

"My reasons for feeling so strongly on the matter," he continued, "will be appreciated by you, Captain Bannister, as a man of position and in Society"—Captain Bannister bowed—"when I tell you that my future son-in-law, Mr. Walmsley, M.P., has proposed me for membership at two of the most exclusive clubs in London. This affair, therefore, must be killed beyond any manner of doubt. I am handing over to you four thousand pounds, which is a very considerable sum, but in return for that I desire that my future immunity be purchased by your signatures to this document."

Mr. Cheape rose at once to his feet. "A document," he observed. "Let me read it."

Mr. Bundercombe handed it over. Mr. Cheape read it aloud:

"We the undersigned desire to apologize most sincerely to Mr. Joseph H. Bundercombe for any allegations we have made against him with regard to a certain episode which took place on March 18th, or thereabouts, in the flat of Mrs. Delaporte. We admit that we were mistaken in the supposition, which we certainly entertained at the time, that Mr. Bundercombe had been guilty of cheating, and we withdraw such allegations unreservedly and tender our apologies."

"Ridiculous!" Captain Bannister exclaimed.

"Absurd!" Mrs. Delaporte echoed.

"I may add," Mr. Cheape joined in, "that I could not possibly recommend my clients to sign such a document."

Mr. Bundercombe took up his hat.

"When I started out this morning," he declared, "I felt convinced that this conference would come to nothing. I told Mr. Wymans here that I was prepared to settle, but on my own terms, and my own terms only. I don't want any undertaking not to molest me in the future. That isn't good enough. I want to be able to show a document such as you have there, which completely exculpates me from any charge that might at any time be brought. And without it," he added, once more bringing his fist down upon the back of that easy chair, "I do not part with one penny of my four thousand pounds."

Mr. Cheape read out the document which he himself had prepared, but Mr. Bundercombe waved it away.

"Come, Paul!" he said to me, with a sigh. "Come, Mr. Wymans! I disclaim all responsibility for the failure of this conference. I have done my best. It cannot matter a snap of the fingers to our friends here in what form the document is couched which they give me in exchange

for my four thousand pounds. Since they are so particular about the trifle, I have finished."

He led the way towards the door, and there was an appearance of finality about his tone and shoulders which was exceedingly convincing. We had reached the threshold, and were, indeed, indulging in a little skirmish as to who should pass through the door first, when Mr. Cheape's resigned voice caused us to pause.

" My clients," he announced slowly, " will sign your document, Mr. Bundercombe. They protest—they protest vigorously against its wording, but they are anxious to show you in how large spirited and gentlemanly a manner they wish this affair to be concluded. Once more they yield."

Mr. Bundercombe, without any signs of exultation, returned to his former place, set down his hat upon the chair, and drew a cheque-book from his breast pocket.

" If you will give me a seat and a pen," he said, " I will write you a cheque."

Captain Bannister stared at the cheque-book. He glanced at Mr. Cheape, and Mr. Cheape very vigorously shook his head.

" I am sorry," he objected, " but my clients cannot think of accepting a cheque in settlement of this matter."

Mr. Bundercombe began to show symptoms of annoyance.

" God bless my soul ! " he exclaimed. " Isn't the cheque of Joseph H. Bundercombe good enough for you ? "

Mr. Cheape laid his hand soothingly upon Mr. Bundercombe's shoulder.

" It isn't that we doubt your cheque, sir," he pointed out, " but in a transaction of this sort it is best that no evidences of a lasting nature should exist. A cheque is not, as you know, legal tender, and a cheque my clients certainly could not accept."

Mr. Bundercombe folded up his cheque-book and replaced it in his pocket.

" Then what are you going to do about it ? " he asked.

" Where is your bank ? " Mr. Cheape inquired.

" In Pall Mall," Mr. Bundercombe answered.

" Then I am afraid," Mr. Cheape decided, " there is nothing for it but to ask you to repair there and cash your own cheque."

Mr. Bundercombe rose to his feet.

" All right," he agreed. " I suppose we had better finish the affair whilst we are about it. One of you had better come with me."

Captain Bannister promptly volunteered. He and I and Mr. Bundercombe descended the

stairs and entered the car. We pulled up in a few minutes at the door of Mr. Bundercombe's bank.

"Will you come in with me?" Mr. Bundercombe invited, turning to Captain Bannister.

Captain Bannister excused himself.

"I will wait here with Mr. Walmsley," he said, "if you will allow me."

Mr. Bundercombe departed inside the bank, and reappeared in the course of a minute or so. His breast pocket was bulging. On our way back he drew out five packets of bank-notes, which he counted carefully. Captain Bannister watched him out of the corner of his eye with a hungry expression.

We were altogether absent from the flat only about a quarter of an hour, and we found Mr. Cheape and Mrs. Delaporte indulging in a brandy and soda. The rest of the affair was promptly settled. The notes were counted by Mr. Cheape, the document signed by Captain Bannister and Mrs. Delaporte.

"I am sure," Captain Bannister declared, holding the notes in his left hand, "that no one can be more glad than Mrs. Delaporte and myself that this little affair has been concluded so amicably. If you will allow me, Mr. Bundercombe, to offer you a little refreshment."

Mr. Bundercombe looked at the brandy and soda and sighed.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it's all in the day's work for you people. I don't mind admitting, though, that money wasn't so easily earned in my days that I can watch that four thousand pounds go without feeling it. Thank you, that'll do nicely," he added, accepting the brandy and soda which Captain Bannister handed him.

Mr. Wymans looked on with stern disapproval, and I must say that I sympathized with him. Mr. Bundercombe, however, not only drained the glass with relish, but accepted the outstretched hand of Captain Bannister, and afterwards shook hands also with Mrs. Delaporte.

"If you are passing at any time," she whispered in his ear.

I had had enough of it, and I dragged Mr. Bundercombe away. We drove back to Prince's Gardens in somewhat ominous silence. Mr. Wymans would have taken his leave, but Mr. Bundercombe begged him to come into the library.

"One moment," he insisted. "James," he ordered, addressing the butler, "send in three cocktails to the library. Mr. Wymans will stay to lunch. One moment."

Mr. Bundercombe went to the telephone.

Mechanically he handed me the additional receiver. He asked for a number, and presently received a reply.

"Say, is that Captain Bannister I am speaking to?" he said. "I thought I recognized the voice. This is Mr. Bundercombe. . . . Yes, yes! . . . No, there's nothing we'd forgotten. I just rang you up, though, to give you a word of advice. You want to be just a *lcetle* careful where you try to change those notes."

"What do you mean, sir?" I heard Captain Bannister demand in startled accents. "What do you mean, Mr. Bundercombe?"

"Well," Mr. Bundercombe continued, "those notes are just about the cleverest things I ever came across; but, after all, they aren't exactly the genuine article. I got four thousand pounds' worth of them from a young fellow I was interested in, and I had them put in a safe at my bank so that no one should get into any trouble. It just occurred to me, since we began our little negotiations, that I saw a good way of making use of them. I only had four thousand pounds' worth, so I had to beat you down a bit. However, that'll be all right, Captain, only, as I say, use them a bit carefully. . . . Jove! Ain't he making the telephone sing!" Mr. Bundercombe added, turning to me. "I guess I'll ring off!"

He set down the receiver. Once more the accustomed smile was creeping over his face. Mr. Wymans was looking dazed. The butler had entered the room with the cocktails.

" Say, Paul," Mr. Bundercombe expostulated, " you didn't really think I was parting with four thousand pounds to a sloppy gang like that, did you ? I knew a young chap who was very clever at making those notes," he explained to Mr. Wymans. " I liked him and I converted him, and I sent him over to the States, where he's got a good situation and is working honestly for his living. This was the remainder of his stock. I had 'em lying in the safe deposit of the bank, meaning to destroy 'em. You've got that apology all right ? "

Mr. Wymans slowly smiled. He raised his cocktail to his lips.

" You are a very clever man, Mr. Bundercombe," he said.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EMANCIPATION OF LOUIS

AT about half-past ten in the morning I turned into Prince's Gardens, to find a four-wheeled cab drawn up outside the door of Mr. Bundercombe's house. Upon the roof was a dressing-case made of some sort of compressed cane and covered with linen. Accompanying it was a black tin box, on which was painted in white letters "HANNAH BUNDERCOMBE, PRESIDENT W.S.F." Standing by the door was a footman, with an article in his hand which I believe is called a grip, and which, in the present instance, I imagine took the place of a dressing-case. I surveyed these preparations with some interest. The temporary departure of Mrs. Bundercombe would, I felt, have an enlivening influence upon the establishment. As I turned in at the gate, Mrs. Bundercombe herself appeared. She was followed by a young woman who looked distinctly bored and whom I was not at first able to place. Mrs. Bundercombe was in a state of unusual excitement.

"Say, Mr. Walmsley," she began, and her

voice seemed to come from her forehead, it was so shrill and nasal, "how long will it take me to get to St. Pancras?"

I looked at the four-wheeler, upon the roof of which another servant was now arranging a typewriter in its tin case.

"I should say about thirty-five minutes—in that," I replied. "A taxi would have done it in a quarter of an hour."

"None of your taxis for me," Mrs. Bundercombe expostulated warmly. "I am not disposed to trust myself to a piece of machinery which can be made to tell any sort of lies. I like to pay my fare and no more. If thirty-five minutes will get me to St. Pancras, then I guess I'll make my train."

"You are leaving us for a few days?" I remarked, suddenly catching a glimpse of a face like a round moon beaming at me from the window.

"I have received a dispatch," Mrs. Bundercombe announced, drawing a letter with pride from an article which I believe she called her reticule, "signed by the Secretary of the Women's League of Freedom, asking me to address their members at a great public meeting to be held at Leeds to-night."

"Very gratifying," I murmured.

"How the woman knew that I was in England,"

Mrs. Bundercombe continued, carefully replacing the missive, "I cannot imagine, but I suppose these things get about. In any case, I felt it my duty to go. Some of us, Mr. Walmsley," she added, regarding me with a severe air, "think of little else save the various pleasures which we are able to cram into our lives day by day. Others are always ready to listen to the call of duty."

"I wish you a pleasant journey, Mrs. Bundercombe," I said, raising my hat. "I suppose I shall find Eve in?"

"No doubt you will," she snapped.

I glanced at the depressed young woman.

"I am taking a temporary secretary with me," Mrs. Bundercombe explained. "Recent reports of my speeches in this country have been so unsatisfactory that I have lost confidence in the Press. I am taking an experienced shorthand writer with me, who will furnish the various journals with a verbatim report of what I say. Then there can be no mistakes."

"Much more satisfactory, I am sure," I agreed, edging towards the house. "I wish you a successful meeting, Mrs. Bundercombe. You mustn't miss your train."

"And I trust," Mrs. Bundercombe concluded, as she turned to enter the cab, "that if you accompany Eve on her shopping expeditions to-day,

or during my absence, you will not encourage her in any fresh extravagances."

I made my way into the house and entered the morning-room as the cab drove off. Mr. Bundercombe and Eve were waltzing. Mr. Bundercombe paused at my entrance and wiped his forehead. He was very hot.

"A little ebullition of feeling, my dear Paul," he explained, "on seeing you. You have met Mrs. Bundercombe? You have heard the news?"

"I gathered," I remarked, "that Mrs. Bundercombe's sense of duty is taking her to Leeds."

Mr. Bundercombe breathed a resigned sigh.

"We shall be alone," he announced, with ill-concealed jubilation, "if we have any luck at all, for three days. One never knows, though. I propose that we celebrate to-night. Unless," he added with a sudden gloom, "you two want to go off and dine somewhere alone."

"Not likely," I assured him quickly.

"Daddy!" Eve exclaimed reproachfully.

Mr. Bundercombe cheered up.

"Then, if you are both agreeable," he proposed, "let us go and pay Branco a visit. I have rather a fancy to show him a re-established Mr. Bundercombe. You know, I sometimes think," he went on, "that Branco was beginning to regard me with suspicion."

"There isn't any doubt about it," I observed dryly.

"We will dine there to-night," Mr. Bundercombe decided; "that is, if you two are willing."

I hesitated for a moment. Eve was looking at me for my decision.

"I really see no reason why we shouldn't go there," I said. "I have to take Eve to some rather dull relatives for luncheon, and I suppose we shall be shopping afterwards. It will brighten up the day."

"We will give Branco no intimation of our coming!" Mr. Bundercombe suggested with relish. "We shall be in no hurry, so we can order our dinner when we arrive there. At eight o'clock."

"At eight o'clock," I agreed.

"More presents, Paul," Eve informed me, taking my arm. "Come along and help me unpack. Isn't it fun?"

Branco's reception of us that night was most gratifying. He escorted us to the best table, from which he ruthlessly seized the mystic label which kept it from the onslaughts of less privileged guests. He congratulated me upon my parliamentary honours and my engagement in the same breath. It was perfectly clear to me that Branco knew all about us. He addressed Mr. Bundercombe with an air of deep respect, in which was

visible, too, some air of relieved apprehension. He took our order himself with the aid of an assistant *maître d'hôtel*, at whom Mr. Bundercombe glanced with some surprise.

"Where is Louis?" he inquired.

"Gone—left," Branco answered.

Mr. Bundercombe was obviously disappointed.

"Say, is that so?" he exclaimed. "Why, I thought he was a fixture. Been here quite a long time, hadn't he?"

"Nearly twelve years," Branco admitted.

"Has he got a restaurant of his own?" Mr. Bundercombe asked.

Branco shook his head.

"On the contrary, sir," he replied, "I think that Louis has gone off his head. He has taken a very much inferior post at a very inferior place. A restaurant of a different class altogether, not at all *comme il faut*; a little place for the multitude —Giatron's in Soho. The foolishness of it, for all his old clients must be useless! No one would eat at such a hole. It is most mysterious."

We dined well and gaily. Mr. Bundercombe renewed many restaurant acquaintances, and I am quite sure that he thoroughly enjoyed himself. Every now and then, however, a shadow rested upon his face. Watching him, I felt quite certain of the reason. It was only during the last few

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weeks that I had begun to realize the immense good nature of the man. He was worrying about Louis.

We sat there until nearly ten o'clock. When we rose to go, Mr. Bundercombe turned to us.

"Say," he asked a little diffidently, "would you people object to just dropping in at this Giatron's, or will you go off somewhere by yourselves and meet me afterwards?"

"We will go wherever you go, Dad," Eve declared. "We are not going to leave you alone when we do have an evening off."

"I should like to find out about Louis myself," I interposed. "I always thought he was the best *maître d'hôtel* in London."

We drove to Giatron's, and found it in a back street—a shabby, unpretentious looking place, with a front which had once been white, but which was now grimy in the extreme. The windows were hung with little curtains in the French fashion, whose freshness had also long departed. The restaurant itself was low and teeming with the odour of past dinners. At this hour it was almost empty. Several untidy-looking waiters were rearranging tables. In the middle of the room Louis was standing.

He recognized us with a little start, although he made no movement whatever in our direction.

He was certainly a changed being. He stood and looked at us as though we were ghosts. Mr. Bundercombe waved his hand in friendly fashion. It was not until then that Louis, with marked unwillingness, came forward to greet us.

"Come to see your new quarters, Louis," Mr. Bundercombe said cheerfully. "Find us a table, some special coffee, and absolutely your best brandy. We will dine here another evening."

Louis showed us to a table and handed us over to the care of an unwholesome-looking German waiter, with only a very brief interchange of courtesies. And then, with a word of excuse, he darted away. Mr. Bundercombe looked after him wonderingly. The coffee was brought by the waiter, and even the liqueur brandy was served without Louis's reappearance. The effect of his absence upon Mr. Bundercombe, however, was only to make him more determined than ever to get at the bottom of whatever mystery there might be.

"Just tell Louis, the *maître d'hôtel*, I wish to speak to him," he instructed the waiter.

The man departed. Ten minutes passed, but there was no sign of Louis. Mr. Bundercombe sent another and more imperative message. This time Louis obeyed it. As he crossed the room a little hesitatingly towards us, it was almost

sad to notice the alteration in his appearance. At Branco's he had been so smart, so upright, so well dressed. Here he was a changed being. His hair needed cutting, his linen was no longer irreproachable, his clothes were dusty and out of shape. The man seemed to have lost all care in himself and all pride in his work. When at last he reached the table, Mr. Bundercombe did not beat about the bush.

" Louis," he said, " we have been to Stephani's to-night for the first time for some weeks. I came along here to see you because of what Branco told me. Now you can just take this from me. You've got to tell me the truth. There's something wrong with you. What is it ? "

Louis extended his hands. He was making his one effort.

" There is nothing wrong with me," he declared. " I left Stephani's to, as they say in this country, better myself. I am in charge here, next to Monsieur Giatron himself. If Monsieur Giatron should go back to Italy, I should be manager. It seemed like a good post. Perhaps I was foolish to leave."

" Louis," Mr. Bundercombe protested, " I guess I didn't come round here to listen to lies. You and I had some little dealings together, and I feel I've the right to insist upon the truth. Now

then, don't give us any more trouble, there's a good fellow. If you'd rather talk to me alone, invite me into the office or behind that desk."

Louis looked round the room, which was almost empty save for the waiters preparing the tables for supper.

" Mr. Bundercombe," he said, with a little gesture of resignation, " it is because of those dealings I came to trouble."

Mr. Bundercombe eyed him steadily.

" Go on," he ordered.

Louis moved closer still to the table.

" It was those bank-notes, Mr. Bundercombe," he confessed. " You gave me one packet to be destroyed in the kitchen. I obeyed, but I looked at them first. Never did I see such wonderful work. Those notes—every one seemed real. Every one, as I put it into the fire, gave my heart a pang. And then, the other time, when you slipped them under the table to me because Mr. Cullen was around. I took them, too, to the fire. I destroyed one, two, three, four, five—one dozen, two dozen—and then I came to the last two or three, and my fingers, they went slow. I could not bear it. I thought what could be done. My wife, she was not well. I could send her to Italy. I owed a little bill. The tips, they had not been good lately. Behold! There was one

ten-pound note left when all the others were destroyed. I put him in my waistcoat-pocket."

"Go on," Mr. Bundercombe said encouragingly. "No one is blaming you. Upon my word, it sounds natural enough."

Louis's voice grew a little bolder.

"For some time I hesitated how to change it. Then one day I come here to see my friend Giatron —we came together from Italy. I hand him the note. I ask him please change. He give me the change and I stay to have a drink with the head waiter, who is a friend of mine. Presently Giatron comes out. He calls me into the office. Then I begin to tremble. He looks at me and I tremble more. Then he knows that he has got me. Giatron is a very cruel man, Mr. Bundercombe. He made hard terms. He made me give up my good place at Branco's. He made me come here and be his head man. He pays half as much as Branco, and there are no tips, beside which the place offends me every moment. The service, the food, the wines—everything are cheap and bad. I take no pride in my work. I go to Giatron and I prayed him to let me go. But not so. I know my work well. He thinks that I will bring clients. Nowhere else could he get a man so good as I at the wages of a common waiter. So I stay here a slave."

The man's story was finished. In a sense it seemed ordinary enough, and yet both Eve and I felt a curious thrill of sympathy as he finished. There was something almost dramatic in the man's sad voice, his depressed bearing, the story of this tragedy which had come so suddenly into his life. One looked around and realized the truth of all that he had said. One realized something, even, of the bitterness of his daily life.

Mr. Bundercombe sipped his brandy thoughtfully.

" Tell me why did you not come to me or write, Louis," he asked.

The man stretched out his hands.

" But it was to you, sir, that I had broken my word," he pointed out. " When you gave me that first little bundle, you looked at me so steadfastly when you told me that every scrap was to be destroyed, and I promised—I promised you faithfully. And you asked me afterwards about that last batch. You said to me, ' Louis, you are sure that they are all quite gone ? Remember that there is trouble in the possession of them.' And I told you—a lie ! "

Mr. Bundercombe coughed and poured himself out a little more of the brandy.

" Louis," he declared, " you are a fool ! You are a blithering idiot ! You are a goll-darned jackass !

It never occurred to me before. I am the guilty one for placing such a temptation in your way. Now, where's this Monsieur Giatron of yours ? "

Louis looked at him wonderingly. There was a dawn of hope in his face, blended with a startled fear.

" He arrives in ten minutes," he announced. " He comes down for the supper. He is here."

Mr. Bundercombe glanced around. A stout man, with black moustache, had entered the room. His eyes fell at once upon the little group. Mr. Bundercombe turned round.

" So that is Monsieur Giatron ? "

Louis bowed. Mr. Bundercombe beckoned the proprietor to approach.

" An old patron of Branco's," Mr. Bundercombe explained, introducing himself. " Come round to see our friend Louis here."

" Delighted, I am very sure," Mr. Giatron exclaimed, bowing to all of us. " It will be a great pleasure to us to do the very best possible for any of Louis's friends."

Mr. Bundercombe rose to his feet. He pointed to the little glass-framed office at the other side of the room.

" Mr. Giatron," he said, " I have always been a great patron of Louis's. You and I must have a chat. Will you not invite us into your little office

there and show us whether there is not something better to be found than this brandy? We will take a glass together and drink success to your restaurant."

Giatron hastened to lead the way. Eve, in response to a glance from her father, remained at the table, but I followed Mr. Bundercombe. We went into the office, and Giatron himself placed three glasses upon the desk and produced from a cupboard a bottle of what certainly appeared to be very superior brandy. Mr. Bundercombe sipped his with relish. Then he glanced at the closed door.

"Mr. Giatron," he began, "I have been having a chat with Louis. He has told me of his troubles —told me the reason of his leaving Branco and accepting this post with you."

Giatron paused with the bottle suspended in mid-air. He slowly set it down. A frown appeared upon his face.

"Mind you," Mr. Bundercombe continued, "I am not sympathizing with Louis. If what he said is true, I am inclined to think that you have been very merciful."

Giatron recovered his confidence.

"He tried—Louis tried—my old friend," he complained, "to take advantage of me, to enrich himself at my expense by means of a false note."

"That is the only point," Mr. Bundercombe said, emphasizing his words with his podgy forefinger; "was the note bad? Do you know, I can scarcely believe it."

The restaurant-keeper smiled. Very deliberately he produced a great bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the safe, which stood in a corner of the office. Mr. Bundercombe whispered a scarcely audible word in my ear and became absorbed once more in the brandy. Presently Giatron returned. He laid on the desk before us and smoothed out carefully what was to all appearance a ten-pound note.

"If you will examine that carefully, sir," he begged, "you will see that it is the truth I have spoken. That note he is very well made, but he is not a good note."

Mr. Bundercombe slowly adjusted his glasses, placed the note in front of him, and smoothed it carefully with his large hands.

"This is very interesting," he murmured. "Allow me to make a close examination. I've seen some high-class printing in my——"

He broke off suddenly. Giatron started as though he were shot, and jumped round towards me. With unpardonable clumsiness I had upset my glass in leaning over to look at the note. The brandy was streaming across

the linoleum, and the glass was shattered upon the floor.

" I'm awfully sorry ! " I exclaimed, glancing a little ruefully at my trousers. " Could you give me a napkin quickly ? "

Giatron hastened to the door of the office and called to a passing waiter. The napkin was soon procured and I rubbed myself dry. The restaurant-keeper returned to Mr. Bundercombe's side.

" All I can say," Mr. Bundercombe declared, as he drew away from the note which he had been examining, " is that I do not wonder you were deceived, Mr. Giatron. This note is the most perfect imitation I have ever seen in my life. A wicked piece of work, sir."

" You recognize the fact, however, that it is counterfeit ? "

Mr. Bundercombe sighed.

" I fear," he admitted, " that you are right. There is a slight imperfection. Yes, yes, a very bad business, Mr. Giatron. We must patronize your restaurant often, and try to see if we cannot make you a second Branco."

Mr. Giatron returned to the safe with the note, which he carefully locked up. Mr. Bundercombe shook hands with him warmly.

" Very excellent brandy," he pronounced.

" You will see a great deal more of us, my friend. I promise you that."

Mr. Giatron bowed low.

" You are always very welcome, and the young lady," he said.

We rejoined Eve, paid our bill, and made our way to the door. Giatron accompanied us half way and then paused. Louis, looking very pathetic, was in the background. Mr. Bundercombe beckoned to him.

" Louis," he whispered, " you can give your shark of an employer a week's notice to-night."

" But, sir ! " Louis gasped.

" I have the note in my pocket," Mr. Bundercombe continued. " It's cost me a good one, but I owed you that. On Monday week, Louis, I shall order my dinner from you at Branco's."

The man's face was wonderful. He came a little closer. He was shaking at the knees.

" Mr. Bundercombe," he pleaded hoarsely, " you would not deceive me ? "

" On my honour, Louis, the note is in my pocket, already torn in four pieces when I put my hand into my waistcoat pocket to pay my bill. In three minutes it will be in a hundred pieces—gone ! You need have no fear. The note Mr. Giatron is guarding so carefully is a very excellent ten-pound note."

We left Louis, still standing like a man in a dream.

At a quarter to eight on the following Monday week, Mr. Bundercombe and I entered Branco's restaurant. Louis himself advanced to greet us—the old Louis whose linen was irreproachable, whose bearing and deportment and smile all denoted the Louis of old. Mr. Bundercombe ordered dinner and beckoned Louis to come nearer.

"Was there any trouble?" he inquired.

"For me, no," Louis replied, "but Monsieur Giatron, never, never have I seen a man like it! He fetched out the note. 'Now,' he said, 'I take your notice. You take mine. Ring up the police. There is the telephone. Ring up the police, I say, or shall I?' Then I tell him. I say, 'I don't believe the note is bad at all.' He laughed at me. He went to the safe and brought it out. He laid it on the desk. 'Not bad!' he jeered. 'Not bad!' He stood looking at it, holding it pressed on to the counter. Mr. Bundercombe, I see his face change. His mouth came wide open, his eyes look as though they would drop out. The arm stretched out towards me fell down. His knees shake a little. He bend over that note. He looked at it and looked at it, and then he looked at me. I stand quite

still. ' I don't believe that note ever was bad,' I say. ' I told you when you charged me I didn't believe it. I have been thinking and thinking, and that is why I have made up my mind to risk it, to give you notice, to go away from here. And if that note is bad, as you say, then you can put me in prison if you will.' Monsieur Giatron he went back to the safe. He rummaged round amongst a pile of papers, and presently he came out again. He was looking pasty-coloured. ' Louis,' he said, ' someone has been very clever. You can go to blazes ! ' And so, Mr. Bundercombe, Mr. Walmsley," Louis wound up, beaming, " here I am."

CHAPTER XIV

MR. BUNDERCOMBE'S LOVE AFFAIR

MR. BUNDERCOMBE, who, notwithstanding his wife's temporary absence in the country, had not been in the best of spirits for several days, became during the course of our *tête-à-tête* dinner at Branco's suddenly and unexpectedly animated. The change in him was so noticeable that I leaned forward in my place to see what could have caused it. Two people had entered the restaurant, and were in conversation now with Branco about a table. Mr. Bundercombe, who, in the affairs of everyday life, had no idea of concealing his feelings, was regarding them with every appearance of lively interest.

"Paul," he whispered, "you must notice these two people. Watch them, there's a good fellow."

They took their places at a table almost opposite to ours. The girl, although she was more quietly and tastefully dressed, and seemed to me to be better-looking, I recognized at once as Mr. Bundercombe's companion at the Prince's Restaurant on one memorable occasion. The man I had never seen before. He appeared to be

of about medium height, slim, with a sallow skin; dark, sleepy eyes which suggested the foreigner; a mouth which, straight and firm though it was, turned up a little at the corners as though in contradiction of his somewhat indolent general appearance. He was exceedingly well dressed, and he carried himself with the quiet assurance of a man who is used to moving in the world.

"Most interesting!" Mr. Bundercombe murmured, having with an effort withdrawn his eyes from the pair. "The girl you doubtless recognize. She was once a typist in the office of Messrs. Harding and Densmore. She was quite lately, as I dare say you remember, able to give me some very useful information—in fact, it is through her that Mr. Stanley did not leave this country for South Africa with a hundred pounds in his pocket."

"And the man?" I asked.

Mr. Bundercombe was thoroughly enjoying himself. He drew his chair a little closer to mine and waited till he was quite sure that no one was within earshot.

"The man," he replied, "is one of the world's most famous criminals."

"He doesn't look it," I remarked, glancing across the room with some interest.

Mr. Bundercombe smiled.

"Great criminals are not all of a type," he reminded me reprovingly. "That is where you people who don't understand the cult of criminology make your foolish mistakes. Our friend opposite is, without a doubt, of gentle, if not of aristocratic, birth. I know nothing of his bringing up, but his instincts do all that is necessary for him. The first time that I saw him was in the Manhattan police court in New York. He was being tried for his life for an attempted robbery in Fifth Avenue and the murder of a policeman. He defended himself and did it brilliantly. He got off. There is scarcely a person, however, who doubts but that he was guilty."

I looked across at the subject of our discussion with renewed interest.

"He shot him, I suppose?" I asked.

"On the contrary," Mr. Bundercombe replied; "he throttled him. The man has the sinews of an ox. The second time I saw him was at a dancing-hall in New York. He was there with a very gay party indeed, but one of them, the wealthiest, mysteriously disappeared. Rodwell —Dagger Rodwell was his nickname—came to England. I saw him once or twice just before I visited you down in Bedfordshire. Cullen

warned me off him, however; wouldn't let me have a word to say to him."

"He doesn't sound the best companion in the world for your little typist friend," I remarked.

Mr. Bundercombe glanced across the room, and at that moment the girl noticed him. She bowed and waved her hand. Mr. Bundercombe responded gallantly.

"I fancy," he murmured, "that she can take care of herself. Come, I feel that I am in an interesting atmosphere once more."

Mr. Bundercombe's deportment was certainly more cheerful. For the last week or two he had been depressed. He had paid visits with Eve and myself, and devoted a reasonable amount of time to his wife. The demands upon his complete respectability, however, had been irksome. He was too obviously finding no savour in life. I really was not altogether sorry at first to notice the improvement in his spirits, although my sentiments changed when, a little later in the evening, the girl opposite left her place and came over to us. She greeted Mr. Bundercombe with the most brilliant of smiles, and he held her hand quite as long as was necessary. He presented me, and I learned that her name was Miss Blanche Spencer. She accepted a chair and Mr. Bundercombe's hospitable offer of a liqueur.

"I must not stay long," she said, laughing. "The gentleman I am with is a sort of cousin of mine, and we don't get on very well; but I mustn't be rude."

Mr. Bundercombe and she seemed to have a great deal to say to one another, and presently I noticed that their heads were drawing closer together. The girl dropped her voice. She was proposing something to which Mr. Bundercombe was listening with keen interest. Presently I heard him sigh.

"If it weren't for certain changes," he explained regretfully, "I guess I wouldn't hesitate a moment. But——"

I heard a whispered reference to myself as his daughter's fiancé, an allusion to the immediate return of his wife to London. She nodded sympathetically.

"Now, if there were any other way," Mr. Bundercombe concluded, "in which I could still further show my gratitude to you personally for a certain little matter, why, I'm all for hearing about it. I consider the balance is still on my side."

She laughed.

"You're really rather a dear," she declared. "Do you know, I am thinking of starting in business for myself."

"Where, and what as?" Mr. Bundercombe inquired.

I shook open an evening paper and heard no more. The girl's leave-taking, however, a few minutes later, was both reluctant and impressive. I felt it my duty to allude to the matter as soon as we were alone.

"You know, sir," I said, "this helping young women to set up in business is a proceeding that's very likely to be misunderstood over here. People don't look at these things too charitably. I am not sure that even Eve would quite approve."

Mr. Bundercombe smiled the smile of a man of the world.

"One can't tell one's womenkind everything," he declared grandiloquently.

I was a little puzzled. I felt convinced that Mr. Bundercombe was concealing something from me.

"Furthermore," I continued, "a man of your position needs to be very careful when he has financial transactions at all with a good-looking young woman who belongs, shall we say, to another world. The young lady herself might take advantage of it."

Mr. Bundercombe appeared to be giving my words full consideration.

"Well, well," he said a little vaguely, "we

shall see. I don't mind telling you, though, Paul, that I would have nothing to say to her first suggestion on your account, my boy. There's a scheme on foot, in which her companion is concerned, which needs financing. I haven't the least doubt that it is something entirely interesting, probably a big jewel robbery or something of the sort."

I looked across at the man, who seemed to be reproaching the girl for her long absence. Almost at that moment he looked up and our eyes met. There seemed to be nothing in his gaze beyond a measure of polite, and not too pointed, interest. Nevertheless, when I looked away I begged Mr. Bundercombe to call for the bill.

"I have had enough of this place," I declared, a little abruptly. "Next time Eve goes to bed with a headache I shall take you to the club."

I was walking down Bond Street with Eve one morning when my suspicions as to Mr. Bundercombe and a certain matter were first aroused. As we neared the Piccadilly end I distinctly saw him vanish through a doorway on the left-hand side. He was most carefully dressed, and he carried in his hand a flat paper parcel which could contain nothing but flowers. Upon some excuse I prevailed upon Eve to cross the road.

There was one small brass plate only on the side of the entrance through which Mr. Bundercombe had disappeared. It was scarcely larger than my hand, and on it was engraved in very elegant characters—

"*Blanche.*
Manicure."

I made no comment at the time, but curiously enough that afternoon, as we sat out under the trees at Ranelagh, Eve herself referred to the subject of her parent.

"Do you notice, Paul," she asked, "how much less we see of Dad lately?"

"He does seem to have been out a good deal," I admitted.

She glanced at me suspiciously.

"You haven't any idea, I suppose——"

The glance and her tone were quite sufficient for me. I hastened to disclaim all responsibility for Mr. Bundercombe.

"Your father," I assured her, "has never treated me with less confidence. Whatever he may be doing at the present moment, he is doing, I assure you, entirely on his own."

"Then I think, if you don't mind, please," she begged, "you must try and get him to take you into his confidence. Of course," she went on,

watching idly a polo team canter into the field, "I do not wish you to feel that he is in any way a responsibility. On the other hand, it does seem so queer, Paul. He has taken to dressing most carefully, and he leaves the house regularly every morning at ten o'clock."

"You've no clue at all as to what he does with himself?" I asked.

"None," she replied, "except that I never saw anyone with such over-manicured nails as his. I never knew him to go to a manicurist in my life, but he is obviously going to one nearly every day now, or he couldn't keep the polish on. If that helps in any way——"

"It might," I admitted with a sigh.

"There he is," Eve exclaimed suddenly, "coming towards us, too. Do, please, take this opportunity, Paul, and see if you can find out anything. You see, a week ago he seemed bored to tears, and now he has just that happy, contented expression which he wears all the time when he is really engaged in something outrageous. I will go and talk to your sister. I think that she is over there with Captain Green."

Mr. Bundercombe greeted me heartily, and at once directed my attention to a small tent where cool drinks were being served. I suffered him to lead me in that direction, and placed myself

in his hands as regards the selection of a suitable beverage. After a good deal of mysterious conversation between him and the attendant, we were served with something yellow in long tumblers, with mint leaves floating at the top. We found a small table and sat down.

"Haven't seen much of you lately, sir," I began.

"H'm! that's because I don't spend three parts of my time in milliners' shops," Mr. Bundercombe replied.

"Where are you spending most of your time?" I asked, determined to take the bull by the horns.

Mr. Bundercombe set down his glass. He made mystic signs to the attendant.

"I've been expecting this," he remarked. "Eve's been setting you on to pump me, eh?"

I nodded.

"That's exactly it," I admitted. "We are due to be married in ten days. We are neither of us anxious for anything in the way of an unfortunate incident."

Mr. Bundercombe appeared to view with surprise the advent of a second tumbler. He reconciled himself to its arrival, however, and handed money to the attendant.

"I realize the position entirely, my dear fellow," he assured me. "I am glad that you have opened it up. I have been bursting to tell you all

about it, but, to tell you the truth, I have hesitated for fear of being misunderstood."

I glanced at his nails.

"Of course," I observed slowly, "the position of an elderly gentleman with a marriageable daughter and a—a wife," I went on bravely, "who finances a young lady interested in manicure into an establishment in Bond Street, is liable to misinterpretation."

Mr. Bundercombe was a little taken aback. He hid his face for a moment behind the newly arrived tumbler.

"Kind of observant, aren't you?"

"I saw you in Bond Street this morning," I told him; "you and a paper parcel. You were entering the establishment, I believe, of Mademoiselle Blanche, whoever she may be."

"Small place, London," Mr. Bundercombe sighed. "Were you—er—alone?"

"I was with Eve," I replied; "but she did not see you, and I did not mention the matter."

"My boy," Mr. Bundercombe decided, "I shall take you wholly into my confidence. I am engaged in a big affair."

My heart sank.

"I pray to Heaven," I said fervently, "that its *dénouement* will not take place within the next ten days."

"On the contrary," Mr. Bundercombe answered, leaning back in his chair and looking at me, with the flat of one hand laid upon the table and the palm of the other upon his left knee, "on the other hand," he repeated, "the *dénouement* is due to-morrow."

"Glad you didn't consider us," I observed gloomily.

Mr. Bundercombe smiled.

"I find myself in this last affair," he remarked airily, "occupying what I must confess, for me is a somewhat peculiar position. I am on the side of the established authorities. I am in the cast-iron position of the man who falls into line with the law of the land. In other words, you behold in me, so far as regards this affair, respectability and rectitude personified. I may even choose to give our friend Mr. Cullen a leg up."

I was relieved to hear it, and told him so.

"I presume," I said, "that Mademoiselle Blanche of Bond Street is identical with the young lady who talked with us at Branco's the other night?"

"Say, you're becoming perfectly wonderful at the art of deduction," my future father-in-law declared. "Same person!"

"She seems quite attractive," I admitted "with a taste for pink roses, I think."

Mr. Bundercombe appeared to regard my remark as frivolous. He moved his chair, however, and brought it closer to mine.

"I dare say you remember," he went on, "how the young lady proposed to me that night that I should finance a little venture in which she and her sleepy-eyed friend opposite were interested."

I nodded.

"From that," Mr. Bundercombe continued, "she went on to suggest that I should help her in the ambition of her life, which, it seems, was to take a single room for manicuring a few clients. In an ordinary way I should have refused that, too, and, if she had been hard up, begged to be allowed to oblige her with a trifling loan, and ended the matter in that way. The reason I didn't was simply because I felt convinced that her desire to acquire a single room in the manicure business was somehow associated with the scheme which she had at first suggested. Therefore I temporized. I appeared to be interested. I asked her in what locality she wished to commence business. She never hesitated. There was only one place she wanted, and that was the room she's got. Just to test her, I took her to see really slap-up premises in another part of Bond Street. She pretended to look at them, but never took the slightest interest. It was just

one room she wanted, and one room only. I realized that both she and her friend were either too desperately hard up to engage that room for themselves, or they were particularly anxious to do it in someone else's name. That was enough for me. I engaged the room."

I glanced once more at Mr. Bundercombe's nails.

"You, at any rate," I remarked, "have been a faithful customer."

"Paul," Mr. Bundercombe continued, "I am playing a part. I am playing the part of a silly old fool. It isn't easy sometimes, but I am keeping it up. I spend a good part of my time in that beastly little parlour, having my nails done over and over again. The girl is bored to death, and I, although I flatter myself I don't show it, I guess I'm bored to death too. All the time I make timid overtures, always half responded to, you know: 'Some day.' 'Next week, perhaps.' You know the game."

I hastily disclaimed any knowledge of such proceedings.

"Well, there we are, anyway," Mr. Bundercombe went on. "I've kept it up all right till now, and the job comes off to-morrow. Miss Blanche is convinced that my interest in her is amatory, and she has occasionally not been quite so careful as she might have been. I have picked

up here and there certain small details which enable me to form a very fair idea as to the nature of this venture in which I was invited to participate. The last few days I have been hesitating whether I should take you into my confidence or not. As it happens, you have forced it. Have you anything particular to do to-morrow ? "

I thought for a moment.

" Nothing very much until the late afternoon, when I go down to the House," I replied.

" Then to-morrow you shall see the end of this thing with me," Mr. Bundercombe promised. " If luck goes our way, you will find we shall have quite a pleasant few minutes."

Eve put her head in at the tent, and we hastened to join her. She drew me a little on one side.

" I think it's all right," I told her.

" I am so glad," she replied. " And, Paul, hadn't you better just drop Dad a hint that Mrs. Bundercombe will be home to-morrow ? I think he'd better have the polish taken off his nails ! "

At twelve o'clock the next morning, I met Mr. Bundercombe by appointment in the Burlington Arcade. We strolled slowly round into Bond Street. Mr. Bundercombe was, for him, unusually serious. He looked about him all the time with

swift, careful glances. As we turned into Bond Street, his pace became slower and slower. Within a yard or two of the spot where I had first seen him disappear he paused, and under the pretence of talking earnestly to me, he looked up and down and across the street with keen, careful glances. At last, with a sudden turn, he led the way into the passage. Together we ascended the stairs. On a door almost opposite to us at the end of the landing was another little brass plate, on which was engraved the name of Mademoiselle Blanche. Mr. Bundercombe took a latchkey from his pocket and opened the door, which he carefully closed after him.

"No one here," I remarked, glancing around.

"Not yet," Mr. Bundercombe said a little grimly. "From now onwards you will be able to understand certain things. Miss Blanche informed me that to-day she had an invitation to go into the country. It was the only way I could discover the day in which they were planning to bring off the coup. If I had been an occasional visitor, she might have risked my coming and finding her away. Since, however, I presented myself every morning at eleven o'clock, she was forced to tell me. You understand as much as that, Paul?"

"Perfectly!"

" You see where we are, then," Mr. Bundercombe continued. " Has any reason occurred to you for the young lady's unalterable decision that no other spot in the whole of London would do for her manicure parlour ? "

I looked out of the window.

" We are next door to Tarteran's," I observed.

Mr. Bundercombe smiled approvingly.

" We are within a few yards," he said, " of the jeweller's shop which contains more valuable gems than any other establishment in the world. We are at the present moment within forty yards of a million pounds' worth of jewels. When you come to reflect upon the character and the past of our friend Dagger Rodwell, you will understand the significance of the fact."

I was beginning to share Mr. Bundercombe's obvious excitement. I, too, had the feeling that we were on the brink of an adventure. He made me stand up against the wall, by the side of the window, so that I could see down into the street. He himself was farther back in the room.

" Follow my lead closely in everything, Paul," he directed. " In the meantime, keep your eye glued upon the pavement. If things turn out as I expect, there will be a grey touring motor-car outside Tarteran's shop in the course of a few minutes. From that car will descend Dagger

Rodwell. He will enter Tarteran's. Watch them as though your very life depended upon it."

I squeezed myself against the wall, and I looked down upon the never-ending procession. The street was continually blocked with motor-cars and taxicabs. On the other side of the way streams of people were moving all the time. I recognized many acquaintances, even in those few minutes. And then suddenly I saw the grey motor-car. I held out my hand to Mr. Bundercombe. Without the slightest attempt at concealment, the man whom Mr. Bundercombe had called Dagger Rodwell alighted from it, and stood for a moment looking into the windows of Tarteran's shop before he entered. He was faultlessly dressed in morning clothes, smoking a cigarette, and carrying a silver-headed cane. After some hesitation he entered the shop. Mr Bundercombe drew a little breath. He had been looking at another part of the street.

" Now things are beginning to move," he observed softly. " Come here, Paul."

He pulled aside a little curtain behind which was a sort of cubicle, an easy chair, a manicurist's stool and a table.

" Step inside here," he whispered, " quickly."

I obeyed him, and in an instant he had entered a similar one. We were scarcely there before I

heard the sound of a key in the door. Through a chink in the curtain I saw Miss Blanche. She pushed back the latch, and stood for a moment as though listening, her face turned towards the stairs up which she had come. If I had any doubt but that tragedy was afoot that morning, it would have been banished by a glance at her.

She was terribly pale, her hands were shaking. Rapidly she withdrew the pins from her hat, hung it upon a peg and smoothed her hair in front of the looking-glass. Then, though her hands were trembling, she heated some water which she placed in a bowl and arranged a manicure set upon a table. Once or twice she stopped to listen. Once, as though drawn by some fascination which she was powerless to resist, she moved to the window and looked down into the street. Mr. Bundercombe remained motionless, and I followed his example. At the back of my cubicle was a window, from which I could still gain a view of the pavement. The streets were thronged with people, and I noticed that the motor-car, which at first I had missed, was standing in a side street almost opposite. Suddenly, on the pavement below, I saw the man whose reappearance I was so earnestly waiting, step casually out on to the pavement. He attempted to cross the street and was lost to sight in a tangle of vehicles. A

"Mr. Bundercombe," she exclaimed feebly. "Mr. Bundercombe!"

"So this is your silly old fool, is it?" Rodwell hissed. "This is the old fool you could twist round your finger, who found the money for your manicure parlour, and who was in love with you, eh? What are you, anyway?" he added, turning furiously upon Mr. Bundercombe. "A cop? Is this why you were trying to pal up to me a few weeks ago?"

Mr. Bundercombe waved aside the accusation.

"Nothing of the sort," he declared.

"Then what is it you want?" Rodwell demanded. "Is it a share of the swag you're after?"

Mr. Bundercombe shook his head. "I am afraid," he sighed, "that there will not be any swag."

Rodwell's face was the most vicious thing I had ever looked upon, yet he kept his head. Mr. Bundercombe and I were an impossible proposition to an unarmed man.

"In the first place," Mr. Bundercombe said, "I must congratulate you most heartily upon your scheme. I saw your double bolt across the road and jump into the car. Everyone's eyes were upon him. They never saw you slip round into the passage. Your double is, I presume,

well supplied with an alibi and evidences of respectability ? "

Rodwell nodded shortly.

" It's his own car, and he's an automobile agent," he replied. " He'd been in the next shop. The people there will be able to swear to him—he gave them plenty of trouble on purpose."

" And you," Mr. Bundercombe murmured, " have the necklace."

" I have," Rodwell snapped. " What about it ? I've got to divide with the girl here. How much do you want ? "

" Only the necklace," Mr. Bundercombe replied.

Mr. Rodwell's geographical description of where he would see Mr. Bundercombe first was too lurid for print. Mr. Bundercombe, however, only shook his head with a gentle smile upon his lips.

" If you're not a cop and you won't stand in, what in the name of glory are you ? " Rodwell spluttered at last.

" I am afraid I must describe myself as a meddler," Mr. Bundercombe confessed—" an intervener. I stand midway between the law and the criminal. I sympathize wholly with neither. I admire the skill and courage which you have shown to-day, but I also sympathize with the head of that establishment whom you

have relieved of possibly many thousand pounds' worth of diamonds. I could not——"

Rodwell made his effort, but Mr. Bundercombe was more than ready. Intervention on my part was quite unnecessary. Mr. Bundercombe's left arm shot out like a piston-rod, and the unfortunate victim of his blow remained upon the carpet with his hand upon his cheek.

"Quite in order, of course," Mr. Bundercombe remarked, "but absolutely useless. Boxing was my only sport when I was a young man, to say nothing of my remarkably athletic young companion. It won't do, Rodwell. You'd better hand over the jewels. Give them to Miss Blanche and she'll hand them to me. They're in the morocco case, I think, in your trousers pocket."

Rodwell produced them sullenly.

"It's your fault, you miserable little fool!" he muttered to Blanche. "I ought to have known better than to have let you into the thing. Fancy taking him for a mug!"

Mr. Bundercombe smiled a pleased smile.

"Come, come," he said, "things are not so bad. You might have been caught."

"Aren't you going to give information?" Rodwell asked quickly.

"Not a thought of it," Mr. Bundercombe assured him, catching the case which Rodwell

threw towards him. "I want, so far as possible, to see both sides happy. Here, Paul, put these in your pocket," he added, turning to me. "If you take my advice," he concluded, "you'll stay where you are until I return. I promise you that Mr. Walmsley and I will return alone, and that I will give no intimation of your presence here to any person whatsoever."

Rodwell was puzzled. He rose slowly to his feet, however, and walked towards the basin at the other end of the apartment.

"All right," he agreed, sullenly. "I shall be here."

Mr. Bundercombe and I descended into the street. I was feeling a little dazed. Mr. Bundercombe led the way into the establishment of Messrs. Tarteran, which was still in a state of some disorder. He asked to speak to the principal, who came forward, still looking very perturbed.

"Sorry to hear of this robbery," Mr. Bundercombe said. "Have they caught the fellow?"

"They caught the man in the motor-car," the manager groaned, "but he had no jewels upon him, and my people can't swear to him. He seems to have a very coherent story."

"Have you communicated with the police?" Mr. Bundercombe asked.

The manager stretched out his hand.

"Four of them in the place now," he answered a little despairingly. "What's the good? The fellow's got away. He's got the finest necklace in the shop with him—gems that are worth twenty thousand pounds."

Mr. Bundercombe nodded sympathetically.

"Have you offered a reward yet?"

"We can't do everything in ten minutes," the manager said, a little testily. "We shall offer one, of course."

"What amount are you prepared to go to?" Mr. Bundercombe asked.

The man looked at him eagerly.

"Do you mean, sir——" he began.

Mr. Bundercombe stretched out his hands.

"You can search me," he interrupted. "I have nothing in the way of jewels upon me. My name is Mr. Joseph H. Bundercombe, and I have a house in Prince's Gardens. This is my son-in-law-to-be, Mr. Walmsley, M.P. for Bedfordshire."

The manager bowed.

"I know you quite well, sir," he said, "and Mr. Walmsley, of course—both he and many of his relatives are valued clients of ours. But about the jewels?"

"What reward shall you offer?"

"Five hundred pounds," was the prompt reply; "more, if necessary."

Mr. Bundercombe smiled approvingly.

"Circumstances," he explained, "of a peculiar nature, into which I am quite sure it will suit your purpose not to inquire, have enabled me to claim the reward and to restore to you the jewels."

The manager gripped him by the arm.

"Come into the office at once," he begged.

We followed him into a little room at the back of the shop. He was trembling all over.

"No questions asked?" Mr. Bundercombe insisted.

"Not a shadow of one," the manager agreed. "I don't care if—pardon me, sir—you'd stolen them yourself. The loss of those jewels would do the firm more harm than I can explain to you."

Mr. Bundercombe turned towards me and I produced the case. The manager seized upon it eagerly, turned on the electric light, and closed the case again with a great sigh of relief. He held out his hand.

"Mr. Bundercombe," he said, "I don't care how you got these. I have been robbed three times and put the matter into the hands of the police, and never recovered a single stone. I'd shake hands with the man who stole so long as

I got them back. How will you have the reward, sir ? "

" Notes, if you can manage it," Mr. Bundercombe replied, as though it were the most ordinary transaction in the world.

The manager went to his safe and counted over notes and gold to the amount of five hundred pounds, which Mr. Bundercombe buttoned up in his pockets.

" I ask you now, sir," he said, " for your word of honour that you will not have us followed nor make any further inquiries into this affair."

" It is given—freely given," the manager promised. " When you leave this establishment I shall turn my back upon you. You can hand over the notes to whomever you like upon the pavement outside, and it won't concern me. Nor," he added, " shall I tell the police for at least half an hour that I have the necklace. They deserve extra trouble for letting the fellow get away."

Mr. Bundercombe and I left the shop and ascended the stairs leading to the manicure parlour. Rodwell, who had bathed his face and made a complete change of toilet, was pacing up and down the little room. Blanche, too, was there, still pale and weeping.

" Now," Mr. Bundercombe began, as he care-

fully closed the door behind him, " I told you a few minutes ago that I was neither on your side nor on the side of the law. I am about to prove it. I have returned the jewels to Tarteran's, no questions to be asked, and I've got the reward. There you are, young lady," he added, placing the roll of notes and a handful of gold in her hands. " You have given me a week or so of intense interest and amusement. There is your reward for it. If you want to divide it with your friend, it's nothing to do with me. Take it and run along. So far as regards this little establishment, the rent is paid for another three months, but so far as regards my connexion with it, I think I needn't explain——"

" That you've been fooling me," the girl interrupted, a faint smile at the corners of her lips. " Do you know, sometimes I suspected that you weren't in earnest. And then one day—I saw your wife—and I wasn't sure ! "

" Good morning," Mr. Bundercombe said severely. " Come along, Paul."

CHAPTER XV

LORD PORTHONING'S LESSON

MR. BUNDERCOMBE laid his hand compellingly upon my arm.

"Say," he begged earnestly, "who's the wizened-up little insect with a snarl on his face?"

My slight impulse of irritation at such a description applied to one of my wedding guests passed when I looked up and saw the person to whom Mr. Bundercombe had directed my attention. I recognized the adequacy of the wording.

"That," I replied, "is the Earl of Porthoning."

"Kind of connexion, isn't he?" Mr. Bundercombe inquired.

I nodded.

"His son married my sister."

Mr. Bundercombe regarded him with a certain wistfulness which I did not at that moment understand. Just then Lord Porthoning made his way towards us. As I watched him approach I realized more than ever the justice of Mr. Bundercombe's description. He was undersized, bent

nearly double, and upon his wizened face and shining out of his narrow black eyes was an indescribable expression of malevolence. Even the smile with which he greeted me had something unpleasant in it.

"Well, Paul!" he exclaimed. "Well, my boy, so you're hooked at last, are you?"

Considering that I was enjoying a few minutes' respite in my task in helping Eve receive our wedding guests, the statement, though crude, was obvious enough.

"Glad to see you, Lord Porthoning," I said, lying miserably. "Do you know my father-in-law, Mr. Bundercombe?"

Mr. Bundercombe extended his ready hand, which my connexion, however, appeared not to see.

"Yes, yes," he admitted; "someone pointed him out to me. I asked who on earth it could be. No offence, mind," Lord Porthoning continued, "but I hate all Americans and our connexions with them. I have been looking at your presents, Paul. A poorish lot—a poorish lot. Now, I was at Dick Stanley's wedding last week—married Colonel Morrison's daughter, you know. Never saw such jewellery in my life. Four necklaces, and a tiara from the Duchess of Westshire which must have been worth a cool ten thousand."

" I am sorry," I remarked, " that my wedding presents do not meet with your approval. Personally, I think that it is very kind of my friends to send me anything at all."

" Rubbish, Paul! Rubbish!" my amiable connexion interjected irritably. " Don't talk like an idiot! You know they send you things because they've got to. You've been through it yourself. Must have cost you a pretty penny in your time sending out wedding presents. Now you reap the harvest."

" I suppose," I observed dryly, " that yours is the reasonable point of view."

" Absolutely, my dear fellow—absolutely!" Lord Porthoning declared. " Of course, you couldn't expect quite the same enthusiasm on the part of your friends when you marry a young lady who is a stranger to all of them and comes from the backwoods of America. Can't think how it is you young Englishmen can marry nothing nowadays unless it shows its legs upon the stage or has a transatlantic drawl. I am going in to see if the champagne they're opening now is any better ; the first glass I had was horrid."

My father-in-law watched him disappear through the crowd, and stood patiently by my side whilst I exchanged greetings with a few newly arrived friends.

"Say," he observed presently, as soon as an opportunity arose for private conversation, "he's a pleasant old gentleman, that connexion of yours."

"Glad you think so," I answered. "I don't call myself a bad-natured fellow, and to-day I feel inclined to be friends with everyone. But I tell you frankly, I can't bear the sight of Lord Porthoning. He has to be asked, but he's like a wet blanket wherever he goes."

Mr. Bundercombe glanced around for a moment. Then he leaned towards me. His manner was earnest, almost pleading.

"Paul," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, "don't you think it's up to us to give a disagreeable little worm like that a bit of a lesson, eh? His lordship has his own way too much. Now if you'll leave it to me I'll give him just a kind of a scare—a shake-up, you know—no real harm. Just teach him, perhaps, not to open his mouth so much. What do you say, Paul?"

I turned and looked at my father-in-law. His expression was that of a schoolboy begging for a holiday. His head was a little on one side, his lips were parted in an insinuating smile. It was a weak moment with me. So far as such a term can be applied to such an event, the wedding

ceremony, which was just over, had been a great success. Eve had looked simply as beautiful as a beautiful girl can look on the one morning of her life. My father-in-law had been dignified and correct in his behaviour, and a merciful misadventure of Mrs. Bundercombe's with a policeman three days previously, which had led to her being arrested with a hammer in her satchel, had finally resulted in her being forced to partake of the hospitality of Holloway for the period of fourteen days. In fact, everything just then with me was *couleur de rose.* The presents which my crabbed connexion spoke of so lightly had been supplemented only an hour before by surely the most magnificent wedding offering from my father-in-law which any man could have—the house in which we were and the whole of the furniture. It was hard to refuse Mr. Bundercombe anything. Before I knew exactly what had happened, my smile had answered his.

"Well," I said, "I rely upon your discretion, Mr. Bundercombe. A little lesson would certainly do Porthoning no harm."

Whereupon Mr. Bundercombe, fearing, apparently, that I might change my mind, vanished amongst the crowd, and the matter, to tell the truth, disappeared from my mind for a short

time. I was surrounded by friends, and the occasion, joyful though it was, possessed a certain unique sentimentality which I found sufficiently absorbing. Eve brought me the latest telegram from Mrs. Bundercombe, which we read together:

> *"Insist upon ceremony being postponed. Am commencing hunger strike. Shall be with you in three days."*

"Your mother's intentions," I remarked to Eve, "may be excellent, but I don't think they'll bring her as far as the Austrian Tyrol."

Eve's eyes were lit with laughter. A moment later, however, she sighed.

"Poor Dad!" she murmured. "I'm afraid he'll have a terrible time when she does come out."

"He'd have a worse if she knew," I rejoined, half to myself.

Eve looked at me suspiciously. She drew a little nearer.

"Paul," she whispered in my ear, "is it true that the inspector who had her followed all that morning was a friend of Dad's?"

I shook my head.

"I am giving nobody away," I replied firmly. "Of course, there were certain troubles to be got over in connexion with your mother's presence

to-day. You remember her saying, for instance, that she would break every bottle of wine she found being served ? "

Eve nodded.

" Perhaps," she murmured, with a half smile, " it is for the best. Where is Dad ? "

I glanced around the room, and at that moment saw Mr. Bundercombe making signs to me from the doorway. I hurried towards him, and he drew me out into the hall.

" Things are in training, Paul," he announced cheerfully. " Now all I want from you is just the smallest amount of help in this little affair."

I looked at him blankly. I had forgotten all about Lord Porthoning.

" It's a very small share indeed," Mr. Bundercombe continued, pleadingly, " but such as it is it's up to you to take it on at this moment. There the little insect goes into the cloak-room. He has gone for his hat and coat. All you've got to do is just to follow him and ask him to come back for one moment. That little room on the left, across the hall, is empty. Bring him into that. Leave the rest to me."

" You're not going too far, are you ? " I asked. " You see, the old blackguard is a sort of connexion."

Mr. Bundercombe laid his hand upon my shoulder.

"My boy," he said, "there will be nothing but just a little incident which you can tell to Eve and laugh about on your way to the station. That I promise you."

I nodded and crossed the hall. Lord Porthoning was preparing to leave.

"Have my car called up," he ordered the footman from the doorstep. "Mind, I'm not going to hang about on the pavement in this sun for anyone. If that's the motor waiting for the young people it'll have to get out of the way. Lord Porthoning's car at once, young fellow. . . . Hallo, Paul," he added. "Come to see me off, eh?"

"Could I have just one word with you, Lord Porthoning?" I begged, as casually as possible.

"Be quick, then. If I haven't wished you happiness it's because I can't see what chance you have of getting it. But I suppose you're like all other young fools on their wedding day. You think the sun's only shining for you."

"I am afraid," I retorted, a little nettled, "that I had not noticed the absence of your good wishes. I wish to speak to you upon another matter."

Lord Porthoning turned quickly and looked at me. There was a change in his expression which puzzled me.

"Well, out with it!" he snapped.

I pointed to the door across the hall.

"I want you to step this way," I said firmly.

I expected an irritable outburst, but to my surprise he turned and preceded me towards the door. We entered the room, and found Mr. Bundercombe there alone. Lord Porthoning looked from one to the other of us. His heavy grey eyebrows were drawn together, his face was the embodiment of a snarl.

"Now what in the name of all that's reasonable," he began in his hard, rasping voice, "made you bring me in here? I don't want to better my acquaintance with that old man, your father-in-law. I'd a good deal rather he'd stayed in his own country. I don't like the look of him—I hate fat men. Don't keep me waiting here, Paul. If you want my advice, I'll give it to you. If you want anything else you won't get it."

Mr. Bundercombe had moved softly round till he was standing with his back to the door. His manner was the manner which he had assumed so successfully in church—dignified, almost solemn.

"Paul," he said, "I asked you to invite this person in here because, now that you are Eve's husband, I felt that the interests of your family must be considered before my own inclinations. In my country we treat all men alike, and I am bound to say that if you'd been married to Eve out in Okata, and I'd seen any old skunk, whether he'd been an earl or what he looks like—a second-hand clothes dealer—sneaking Eve's presents, I'd have had him in prison before you'd reached the station."

"Mr. Bundercombe!" I exclaimed horrified. It seemed to me that my father-in-law was carrying this affair too far.

Lord Porthoning, from whom I had expected a torrent of fierce abuse, stood looking at us both with an expression no written words could portray. His cheeks were ashen. The hands, which were crossed upon the knob of his cane, were shaking. Mr. Bundercombe extended his right hand.

"Sir," he concluded sternly, "for the sake of the conventions of the country in which I find myself, and bearing in mind your connexion with my son-in-law, I have kept the police out of this interview. Be so good as to hand over to Paul the emerald brooch which you have secreted in your coat pocket."

The pall of silence seemed suddenly removed. Lord Porthoning leaned forward. Then he began to talk. Any sympathy which I might have felt for him, any feeling I may have had that my father-in-law's retributive scheme was of too drastic a nature, vanished before he had finished the first three sentences. Mr. Bundercombe, upon whom he heaped abuse of the most virulent character, remained unmoved. When at last Lord Porthoning paused for breath, I turned towards my father-in-law.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"It means," Mr. Bundercombe explained, "that this gentleman who finds my daughter's presents so inadequate, was actually leaving your house with an emerald brooch belonging to Eve in the right-hand pocket of his coat."

Lord Porthoning was once more incoherent. This time, however, I stopped him. I was already heartily sick of the affair, but at this stage I could not back out.

"Lord Porthoning," I said, "there is no necessity for such vigorous denials. The matter is easily arranged. You had better permit me to examine the pocket in question."

"I'll see you d——d first!" my pleasant connexion declared fiercely. "I'll see you and

your common bully of a father-in-law in hell before I allow either of you to touch me or my clothing. Get out of my way, both of you, and be thankful if you don't have to answer for this outrage in a police court."

He swaggered towards the door. Mr. Bundercombe, who had appeared to stand on one side, suddenly caught him by the shoulders.

"Feel in his right-hand pocket, Paul," he bade me.

I did so, and promptly produced the brooch. Lord Porthoning's eyes seemed almost to start out of his head. I could see that he suddenly became limp in Mr. Bundercombe's grasp. His eyes were fixed upon the jewel, and his amazement was undeniable. Mr. Bundercombe winked at me over his head.

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Porthoning?" I demanded as sternly as I could.

My courage was failing me. I felt that the joke, after all, had been a severe one. Lord Porthoning seemed almost on the point of collapse. His eyes never once left the brooch which I was holding.

"I didn't take it!" he gasped. "I swear I didn't take it!"

I was anxious now to finish the affair.

"Lord Porthoning," I said, "I will take your

word. You say that you never took the brooch. Very well, we will assume, for the sake of the family, that it found its way into your pocket by accident."

Lord Porthoning felt his forehead. There were big drops of sweat standing out there. There was something in his extreme agitation which was, in a way, incomprehensible. He edged towards the door.

"I didn't take it!" he muttered. "Let me go! Let me get away!"

Mr. Bundercombe stood on one side. My hand was upon the handle of the door. I looked at my father-in-law questioningly. My sympathies were now almost with the enemy, but I felt bound to see the affair through.

"It is you who discovered this little accident," I remarked. "I think you will agree with me that it is best to say nothing more about it."

Mr. Bundercombe once more winked at me solemnly over the head of my stricken connexion.

"I quite agree with you, Paul," he said. "Under the circumstances, we will let nothing happen to disturb the festivities and harmony of the day. Lord Porthoning will not mind if we just satisfy ourselves that the brooch was the

only instance of—momentary aberration, shall we call it ? "

If Lord Porthoning's attitude had been a little mysterious before, it was absolutely incomprehensible now. He stood suddenly upright and brandished his cane over his head.

" If either of you touch me," he shouted fiercely. " I'll break your skull ! This is blackmail ! I'll send for the police ! Let me go ! "

His sudden fit of anger, justifiable though it certainly seemed on the face of it, nevertheless took both Mr. Bundercombe and myself by surprise. The former, indeed, was in the act of opening the door when he paused. Once more he caught my distinguished connexion by the collar, and thrust his hand into the other coat-pocket. When he withdrew it, it was filled with rings, a bracelet, and a pendant. He threw them silently on to the table. Without a word he thrust his hand in once more, and brought out a little black ivory carving of a Japanese monk, which was perhaps one of the most valuable of my offerings.

" My God ! " Mr. Bundercombe muttered. There was a blankness in his expression which I could not understand.

I frowned. It seemed to me that the affair

had now gone much too far. Lord Porthoning had staggered to a chair and was sitting there with his face buried in his hands. His cane had fallen on to the ground before him. He was a stricken man. I turned to my father-in-law.

"This is too much of a good thing, sir," I whispered angrily. "The one brooch was all right enough, so far as it went, and he deserved a lesson. But these other things——"

A look in Mr. Bundercombe's face suddenly froze the words upon my lips. He leaned over towards me.

"Paul," he declared earnestly, "on my honour I put nothing in his pocket except the brooch. I knew no more of those things," he added, pointing to the table, "than you did."

I was speechless. Lord Porthoning looked up. I had never seen a face quite like his in my life. One side of it seemed drawn with pain. He checked a sob. His fingers gripped at the air as he spoke.

"Paul," he begged hysterically, "don't give me away. I give you my word of honour—I give you my word as a Porthoning—I can't help it! You know what they call the d——d thing when women have it—kleptomania, isn't it? I tell you that I can't see these things without that same horrible, fascinating, cruel instinct. My hands are on them before I know it. But—

my God ! " he broke off, " it's sending me mad, Paul, for as I live I never set hands upon that brooch ! "

" How long has this been going on ? " I asked, almost mechanically. " Perhaps you are the reason that it has become the fashion to send detectives to guard wedding presents ? "

" I am the reason," Lord Porthoning confessed, his voice shaking. " Paul, somehow I believe—I believe that this has stopped it. You'll kill the instinct. Listen. You are off directly. Let this gentleman, your father-in-law, come round to my house. I will restore to him, I swear, every article I have ever taken in this fashion. He can find out the owners by degrees, and I promise that I will never again attend a wedding reception as long as I live ! "

Outside I could hear them calling for me. I glanced at the clock. It was within a few minutes of the time fixed for our departure. Mr. Bundercombe nodded to me.

" Very well," I agreed ; " it shall be as you say."

" I will wait here," Lord Porthoning said in a trembling tone. " Mr. Bundercombe can come back for me after he has seen you off. He can go home with me in the motor. Take—take care of those things."

Mr. Bundercombe covered them over with an antimacassar. We left him sitting there and went out into the hall, where Eve was already waiting. Mr. Bundercombe was a little unnerved, but he pulled himself together.

"Word of honour, Paul," he declared. "I never saw the old rat take a thing! I simply landed him with the brooch. It was not until he was going out that I caught a glimpse of those other things in his pocket."

We drove off ten minutes later. I looked out of the motor as we swung round into the main thoroughfare. Behind the window of the little sitting-room I saw the pale, almost ghastly, face of Lord Porthoning. He caught my eye and waved his hand weakly. On the pavement, in front of the striped awning, stood Mr. Bundercombe, large, beaming, both hands outstretched. Eve waved her handkerchief. As we finally disappeared she glanced towards me.

"Has Dad been up to anything, Paul?" she asked. "He has just that kind of satisfied expression that always used to terrify me."

"Like a cat licking its whiskers after a stolen saucer of milk," I suggested.

She laughed.

"You mustn't make fun of Dad," she begged. "He's such a dear."

"I shall never attempt to make fun of your father," I assured her fervently. "I think that he is quite the most remarkable man I ever met. And now—— !"